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## Exceptionalism and Transatlanticism in Early American Literature (1760-1860) and Classic Hollywood Cinema (1930-1960)

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## ABSTRACT

### EXCEPTIONALISM AND TRANSATLANTICISM IN EARLY AMERICAN LITERATURE (1760 – 1860) AND CLASSIC HOLLYWOOD CINEMA (1930-1960)

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This dissertation explores the seemingly contradictory characteristics of two distinct art forms in two distinct eras. When exploring the period 1760 to 1860, scholars of transatlanticism argue that the literature of Great Britain and the young United States are of one unified cultural identity, and yet this period is also one in which American writers sought to establish a unique national voice. To understand this dichotomy, this dissertation examines the parallels between Early American Literature, or EAL, and classic Hollywood cinema (1930-1960). This exercise in intertextuality demonstrates how both mediums in both periods absorbed influences from other countries and other times and shaped it into a culturally unique art form that expressed a national identity. The chapters compare and contrast the following films and literary works: Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) and two screen adaptations (1926 and 1934), works which, on the one hand, display the very "language" of a hybridized art form and, on the other, deviate from those newly set standards; an exploration of "orientalism" and romantic escapism through a juxtaposition of Washington Irving's *Tales of the Alhambra* (1832) and Frank Capra's *Lost Horizon* (1937); Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* (1771-1790) and the film *Sergeant York* (1941), both of which deal with a concrete attempt to alter national identity; and a comparison of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851) and John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956),

which bare similarities beyond just the obvious monomaniacal quest and its inherent distortion of the hunter. By stressing the conflict between the forces of transnationalism and national exceptionalism, this project confirms the significance of hybridization — an approach which transcends the parameters of medium, language, genre, and nationality, and explores the liminal spaces between Romanticism and Realism.

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EXCEPTIONALISM AND TRANSATLANTICISM IN EARLY AMERICAN  
LITERATURE (1760 – 1860) AND CLASSIC  
HOLLYWOOD CINEMA (1930-1960)

BY

JOHN M. PRICE  
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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
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## INTRODUCTION

In 1820, Sydney Smith famously and provocatively asked, “Who reads an American book?” (79). Similarly, but conversely, by the 1930s, it could reasonably be asked—“Who does not watch an American movie?” This succession of primacy, albeit across mediums, appears to lend credence to Ralph Waldo Emerson’s 1856 prophecy that “England, an old and exhausted island, must one day be contented, like other parents, to be strong only in her children” (*Centenary* 5:275).<sup>1</sup> The novel of the first half of the nineteenth century and the movie of the first half of the twentieth century were the preeminent forms of pop culture in their respective times, and American cinema by the 1930s had, just as British literature had a century earlier, set a standard against which the rest of world cinema would, like a child striving to emerge from its parents’ shadow, struggle, and by which all future efforts would be measured.

The contentiousness of comments such as Smith’s and Emerson’s embodied a period, 1760-1860, which featured a great paradox. This period of Early American literature (EAL) is one that modern literary studies attempts to examine through the lens of transatlanticism. Transatlanticism, as indeed does its larger aspiration—transnationalism, seeks to find those aspects of different cultures that transcend boundaries of nationhood. Obviously, such an endeavor stresses commonality. However, as Smith and Emerson indicate, this period is one in which a deliberate attempt was made to differentiate American literature from its formidable British predecessor. In 1837, in “The American Scholar,” often referred to as the American declaration of cultural independence, Emerson states, “We have listened too long to the courtly

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<sup>1</sup> *English Traits* (1856).

muses of Europe” (*Centenary* 1:114). 1760 to 1860 is an ideal period for the study of this dichotomy, extending as it does from the origins of the American Revolution to the doorstep of the American Civil War—a period spanning political independence to cultural independence. Such an autonomous enterprise would call heavily upon previous allusions to and, indeed, augment the notion of, American exceptionalism. Yet, as transatlanticism reminds us, this new and supposedly unique American voice was irrevocably infused with influences from other times and places.

A strikingly similar set of circumstances existed in what is often called classic Hollywood, a period this dissertation defines as 1930 to 1960.<sup>2</sup> The earliest claims to the invention of cinema belong to the French, namely the Lumiere brothers and Georges Méliès.<sup>3</sup> However, as many have suggested, and as will be discussed in detail later, the developments by Edwin S. Porter and D. W. Griffith placed the United States in the vanguard of the evolution of the language of narrative cinema. To designate, therefore, Hollywood in the 1930s as the culmination of this language is to also immediately admit a debt to those who, even in their own country, went before. Similarly, the writers of, what F. O. Matthiessen calls, the “American Renaissance” owed an equal debt to earlier literary rumblings of “Americanism.” Furthermore, despite the preeminence of Hollywood’s role in film, other influences were greatly affecting this

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Ray and Richard Jewell feel that the period begins at the start of the sound era, while David Bordwell takes it back to 1917. Jewell sees it ending in 1945, while Bordwell pushes to 1960. Irrespective of the exact dates, classic Hollywood demonstrated what Andre Bazin called the “genius of the system.” It is a period in which both earlier and external elements were codified into the very language of narrative cinema, and in so doing, forever intertwine “Americanness” and the movies.

<sup>3</sup> The United States’ claim to the initial technological discovery of cinema are those developments made by Thomas Edison. However, as Frank Nugent wrote in 1939, it was the First World War and its aftermath that allowed the United States to wrest dominance of the film industry from the rest of the world (137).



cinematic “grammar,” such as Soviet montage and German Expressionism. The studio system of the sound era was inarguably built upon the foundations laid out by silent films and heavily influenced by foreign films—both stylistically and in the body of individual artists. Yet despite these transnational permeations, this period was one that saw Hollywood films become the number one exporter of American cultural identity to the world.<sup>4</sup>

On the surface, a comparison between EAL and classic Hollywood appears a bit strained. Classic Hollywood profusely adapted nineteenth-century literature, but early American literature was never as fertile a medium as British literature of the same period. The examples are numerous: *Frankenstein* (1931), *Wuthering Heights* (1939), and *Jane Eyre* twice (1934 and 1943). Charles Dickens’ work saw several adaptations: *David Copperfield* and *A Tale of Two Cities*, both in 1935, as well as *A Christmas Carol* (1938). This proclivity for British literature also extended to the second half of the nineteenth century, and as such includes: *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and *Dracula* in 1931, *The Invisible Man* (1933), *Treasure Island* (1934), *The Prisoner of Zenda* and *Captains Courageous* both in 1937, and Sherlock Holmes twice in 1939.<sup>5</sup> Even French literature of the period was more desirable as source material than American literature: *The Count of Monte Cristo* (1934), *Les Miserables* (1935), *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1939), and three times, including the silent era, *The Three Musketeers* (1921, 1935 and 1948).

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<sup>4</sup> Classic Hollywood, in the body of its work, created an image of the United States that exported a cultural representation to the world. “At no other time in the history of American film has their content been so carefully sculpted to offer a unified, ideologically consistent and idealized vision of the nation and its people” (Jewell 147).

<sup>5</sup> When extending the period of comparison to the end of the 1800s, American literature does begin to appear more in the classic era of Hollywood, mostly due to film adaptations of Mark Twain: *The Prince and the Pauper* (1937), *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1938) and *The Adventures of Huck Finn* (1939). These works, however, are much more plot-driven than American literature from the first half of the nineteenth century.

Early nineteenth-century literature from the New World, offered classic Hollywood nothing as film-ready as Dickens.<sup>6</sup> Emerson could offer no narratives. The short stories of Washington Irving, Nathaniel Hawthorne or Edgar Allan Poe are just too brief for feature films.<sup>7</sup> In fact, the works of Poe, thanks predominately to Roger Corman, have come to the screen many times, mostly after the classical age of Hollywood had waned, yet these “adaptations” bear little resemblance to their original texts beyond the title, reminding us that film adaptations of literature often augment as well as omit.<sup>8</sup> The longer works of Hawthorne provide more material, in a strictly quantitative sense, but, adapting Hawthorne presents its own set of problems. As for Herman Melville, the first screen adaptation of *Moby-Dick*, in the sound era, was not until 1956 and cinematically expressing the novel’s introspective elements is difficult, if not impossible. This dissertation argues that despite this obvious, yet perhaps superficial connection between British literature and classic Hollywood, there is a deeper and more multi-layered connection between EAL and classic Hollywood. To address the dearth of EAL in classic Hollywood and make the assertion that a decisive link exists between early American literature and classic American film, we need to show commonality beyond just their nation of origin.

There has always been a distinction between populist cinema, the “movies,” and art cinema, “film.” Yet the two characteristics are also intrinsically linked. For instance, the

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<sup>6</sup> James Fenimore Cooper did indeed offer the kind of adventure tales that Hollywood coveted, and *The Last of the Mohicans* was adapted in 1920 (silent) and 1936, but Cooper’s work could not offer the sheer volume of material that Dickens could.

<sup>7</sup> Some argue that short stories actually make better cinematic material since lengthy novels often have to leave so much of the original narrative out.

<sup>8</sup> See Chapter One, pp. 62-64 and 70-71.

connection between classic Hollywood film and the melodrama of the Victorian stage is unarguable. In a superficial sense, melodrama, as the term indicates, relies on the intrusion of music to solicit audience emotion and the start-to-finish musical scoring in classic Hollywood demonstrates this heritage. The appeal to emotion is a dominant characteristic of theatrical melodrama and certainly early film plays heavily on emotional impact. However, literary Romanticism can also be described as, among other attributes, an appeal to the emotions. In another populist influence, the “dime novel” contributed to the Hollywood Western. However, the connection between Hollywood Westerns and Zane Grey is a far less nuanced parallel, and certainly more obvious, than the connection between Westerns and Herman Melville. While even this dissertation, by citing Belen Vidal in Chapter Three, admits the distinction between popular and art cinema,<sup>9</sup> one of the assertions of this dissertation is that as classic Hollywood gave way to New Hollywood, this distinction would become a chasm.<sup>10</sup> In classic Hollywood, the division between the popular and the artistic was less pronounced than it is today, thus this dissertation confidentially proceeds to examine the connection between classic Hollywood and the writers of the American Renaissance who were also both popular and artistic.

Although this comparison between two different mediums in two distinct periods may seem an extreme test for intertextuality, the connections between these two periods go to the essential nature of the relationship between film and literature. It is also the clash between formalism and realism and the degree to which both periods and both mediums acquiesce to a blending, or hybridization, rather than an insistence on a pure form of each. Similarly, it is an

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<sup>9</sup> See p. 123.

<sup>10</sup> See p. 206-7, especially n. 3.

examination of the melding of influences from preceding periods and transnational influences into a unique style. Most of all, it is a comparison between two distinct efforts to promote national identity through two distinct art forms in two distinct eras. Despite the influences from beyond their respective periods and national borders, both EAL and classic Hollywood made an undeniable and concerted effort to take an existing art form and, transtemporal and transnational impacts notwithstanding, forever put an American stamp upon that medium, and by so doing, create the myth of a national identity. The seemingly contradictory notion that both periods are simultaneously highly transatlantic yet also highly nationalistic is at the very heart of defining EAL and classic Hollywood and the central argument of this dissertation. There is a scene in *The Plymouth Adventure* (1952) that concisely sums up the dichotomy between transatlanticism and cultural exceptionalism. One of the passengers of the Mayflower professes his reason for voyaging to North America: “I want to see if it is truly a new world or just the back side of the old one.” There is of course a third possibility—that they are concomitant, as this dissertation asserts.

### **Walt Whitman and Frank Capra**

Walt Whitman and Frank Capra are seldom compared, but they strongly support the assertion that EAL and classic Hollywood bear much more in common than an initial evaluation might yield. In the Preface to his 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman suggests that the poetry of America will be a political poetry, or as he called it, “the great psalm of the republic” (6), and it was also to be a poetry of the common man. The uniqueness of this American political poetry, according to Whitman, lay in the national identity “of persons who never knew how it felt to stand in the presence of superiors” (6). Thomas Higginson attests to

the link between a distinct national literature and a distinct national character when he writes, “The moment American fiction came upon the scene, it brought a change. Peasant virtue vanishes when the peasant is a possible president, and what takes its place is individual manhood, irrespective of social position” (11). Furthermore, Paul Giles reminds us that “Walt Whitman in ‘Song of Myself’ sought to position himself as a natural embodiment of an emerging American National consciousness” (*Transnationalism* 259). It is not too large an act of dehistoricization to suggest that Whitman foretells the films of Frank Capra. Capra’s canon celebrates the power of the common man, and this admiration for the jedermann blends with an overt political theme in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*.

The central character of *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* expresses the virtues of both Whitman and Capra’s common man. Jeff Smith (James Stewart), delivers a declaration of his own political philosophy that plainly echoes the sentiments of Whitman:

That’s what’s got to be in it [his proposed senate bill]: The Capitol dome. I want to make that come to life for every boy in this land. Yes, and all lighted up like that too. You see, boys forget what their country means by just reading ‘the land of the free’ in history books . . . Liberty is too precious a thing to be buried in books, Miss Saunders. Men should hold it up in front of them every single day of their lives and say, I’m free, to think and to speak. My ancestors couldn’t. I can.

Smith’s, and Capra’s democratic sentiments express a humility that shies away from the assumption of government, but Whitman’s belief in the common man overrides such hesitation as Smith is reminded, “You had faith in something bigger [than just the system]. You had plain, decent, everyday common rightness.” In addition, Stewart’s down-home stammering brings a

humility to political power and his performance gives a cinematic voice to Whitman's common man.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to praise for the common man, there is another similarity between Whitman and Capra, albeit more veiled. While the imagery in Whitman's poetry is very often urban, Whitman also cements his ties to the Transcendentalist love of nature when he says, "The pride of the United States leaves the wealth and finesse of the cities" (6). Smith too lauds the importance of nature to the American spirit as he explains to his urban-dwelling secretary, Saunders (Jean Arthur):

The prairies and wind leaning on the tall grass and lazy streams down in the meadows, angry little midgets of water up in the mountains. Cattle moving down the slope, against the sun. Campfires and snowdrifts . . . every tree, every rock, every anthill, every star is filled with the wonders of nature . . . Have you ever noticed how grateful you are to see daylight again after coming through a long, dark tunnel? . . . Always try to see life around you as if you just came out of a tunnel.

Classic Hollywood, although often concentrating on urban lifestyles, never completely detaches itself from concepts of nature,<sup>12</sup> to which early American existence and EAL were equally linked.

Content is not the only similarity between Whitman and Capra. The technique in Whitman's verse is eclectic, choppy, a collection of seemingly random lines of descriptions of people and places:

The pure contralto sings in the organ loft,  
The carpenter dresses his plank, the tongue of his foreplane whistles its wild ascending  
lisp,  
The married and unmarried children ride home to their Thanksgiving dinner,

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<sup>11</sup> Chapter Three will suggest that the Hollywood star system would also supply the "perfect" common man in Gary Cooper.

<sup>12</sup> See Chapter Four regarding Hollywood's love affair with nature specifically in the Western.

The pilot seizes the king-pin, he heaves down with a strong arm,  
 The mate stands braced in the whale-boat, lance and harpoon are ready,  
 The duck-shooter walks by silent and cautious stretches,  
 The deacons are ordain'd with cross'd hands at the altar,  
 The spinning-girl retreats and advances to the hum of the big wheel,  
 The farmer stops by the bars as he walks on a First-day loafe and looks at the oats and  
     rye,  
 The lunatic is carried at last to the asylum a confirm'd case, (37)

This type of verse is called catalog poetry; “appearing in sequences, the individual items in a catalogue accrue additional meaning beyond that of each item considered independently” (Grant 265). Although Barry Grant admits that Sergei Eisenstein wrote very little about Whitman (264), Grant, nonetheless, explores the connection between Whitman and Eisenstein.<sup>13</sup> The basis of this comparison is that Whitman’s verse is very reminiscent of cinematic montage. Beyond this elemental building block of film, Whitman’s catalogs also remind us of a staple artifice of classic Hollywood—the montage sequence, which was a favorite construct of Capra and conspicuously employed in *Mr. Smith*.<sup>14</sup> Such sequences offer ellipses of time and space and tie seemingly unrelated individual images with a thematic unity—just as does Whitman’s verse.

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<sup>13</sup> Eisenstein does refer to “Walt Whitman’s huge montage conception” (*Form* 231), and according to Grant, both Whitman and Eisenstein “employ a progression of detail which relate to a larger concept” (266). Kenneth Price believes that Whitman’s catalogs foreshadow “the jump cutting, fluent mobility, and surprising juxtapositions frequently seen in films” (39). Price describes Whitman’s verse as “a style that glorified in the realistic details of life and moved freely across space and that linked images by a private logic” (39).

<sup>14</sup> Capra employs a montage in which Smith, who upon arriving in Washington, dashes all over town—shot after shot of national monuments and other images of American history, interspersed with Smith’s enthralled expressions, and culminating at the Lincoln memorial where an old grandfather reads the inscription to his grandson and emphasizes the word ‘liberty.’ A less noble, but more humorous exploitation of the montage sequence occurs when Smith seeks out those cynical reporters, all over town, who maligned him in the press, punching them one by one. The montage sequence is also employed to show Smith’s Boy Rangers endeavoring to fight, with tragic results, for Smith by printing and circulating their own paper to combat the enormous power of the mass media aligned against Smith.

The greatest connection between Whitman and Capra is their admiration for the courage that each artist saw as an integral part of this American poetry. Smith's filibuster, his great stand against systematic corruption, epitomizes the courage of Whitman's common man. In the final scene, Smith utters in a broken voice:

There's no compromise with truth . . . Just get up off the ground . . . Get up there with that lady that's on top of this Capitol dome. That lady that stands for liberty. Take a look at this country through her eyes if you really want to see something. And you won't just see scenery. You'll see the whole parade of what man's carved out for himself after centuries of fighting. And fighting for something better than just jungle law. Fighting so he can stand on his own two feet, free and decent like he was created. No matter what his race, color or creed . . . There's no place out there for graft or greed or lies or compromise with human liberties . . . Great principles don't get lost once they come to light. They're right here. You just have to see them again.

The previous sentiment is effectively summarized by one of Whitman's delineated American characteristics, "their deathless attachment to freedom" (6). Smith exhibits Whitman's devotion to freedom almost to the point of death.

Whitman saw the American poet as called on to tell a great narrative of this new national identity. In 1920, Randolph Bourne would attest that recognizable in the poetry of Whitman was a distinct national spirit (42). Kenneth Price suggests that Whitman's style "stresses the democratic inclusiveness of photography, its capturing of all in its field in opposition to the selectivity of painting" (39), and both Whitman and the cinema articulate the essence of democracy.<sup>15</sup> Whitman saw the American poet as "the voice and exposition of liberty" (15).

Whitman would undoubtedly have seen Capra as an American poet as well.

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<sup>15</sup> Grant sees Whitman as championing no specific individual, but all individuals, and he associates this with the democratic nature of Whitman's verse—celebrating the collective. This seems contradictory to the title "Song of Myself," but is no doubt due to Grant's association between Whitman and Eisenstein. Certainly the communist Eisenstein would be celebrating such, but it is debatable to what extent Whitman's praise of the common many is Marxist in nature, but it is certainly not the essence of Capra. Capra champions the local community over the larger, megalithic collectives, but, in Capra's philosophy, it



Paralleling Whitman and Capra yields many questions for scholars of both EAL and classical Hollywood. While the most prominent query is to what degree these respective periods combine influences beyond their time and their shores with a truly unique national voice, this correlation also serves to launch a plethora of research questions. When making a comparison to literature, does American cinema embrace the rationalism of the Enlightenment or the anti-empiricism of Romanticism? Is the conflict between Romanticism and Realism essential to understanding the relationship between film and literature? Is Emerson foreshadowing the verisimilitude of cinema when he describes, “an emanation of that very thing or reality they tell of, and not merely an echo or picture of it” (*Journals* 7:157)? Is the characterization of EAL as a hybridization of Romanticism and Realism, equally appropriate as a description of classic Hollywood cinema? Does the concept of hybridization apply not only at the level of genre and language, both also lead to an ambiguity of national identity? Is the quest for transcendence, in both Romanticism and transatlanticism, based on a rejection of the notion of “privileged frames of reference,” and therefore are both anti-exceptionalism? Looking forward, does the mutating of British Romanticism into American Transcendentalism prefigure an ever-increasing element of political activism in American cinema, and is the effort to promote a national voice, both in artistic creation and academic examination, a recursive and cyclical event?

### **Early American Literature**

The ascent of the concept of American exceptionalism was a process the foundations of which began almost immediately upon the arrival of Europeans in, what they regarded as, the

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is the strength of the individual upon which the local community depends. Stalin, and therefore Eisenstein neither, would laud such individualism.

New World. The earliest English voices on the North American continent, such as William Bradford, William Brewster and John Winthrop did indeed, as Orestes Brownson observed, think of themselves as Englishmen living in America, not as Americans. “Our fathers were Englishmen which came over this great ocean and were ready to perish in this wilderness” (Bradford 116). However, although these “proto-Americans” might not yet *be* the American voice, they certainly lay the groundwork for national uniqueness and their writings can be seen as an embryonic stage of national identity. In fact, Winthrop’s sermon of 1630, “We shall be as a city on a hill” (158), has often been seen as the origin of American exceptionalism (Pease, *New American* 76-7 and Hodgson 1).

Initially, the way in which Europeans, who remained in Europe, viewed the New World was not altogether very different from the explorers and later settlers who made the journey to North America, both viewpoints centered on the concept of opportunity. While those on one side of the Atlantic would come to call the New World “home,” and those on the other side would not, they both shared a view of the “raw” continent as a resource to be exploited. As John Elliott would state in 1970, “creating great new enterprises out of nothing, on the far side of the Atlantic, was bound to produce a new confidence in man’s capacity to shape and control the world” (*Old World* 78). Many Europeans saw North America as “an unformed space onto which they could project their designs for a better, an improved European world” (Greene 63). In 1995, Elliott would attribute to such a conceptualization, the development of the European “doctrine of improvement.” They began to see the New World as the place for utopian experimentation (Elliott, “Final” 404). This notion of opportunity in the New World would also be seen reciprocally as opportunity in the Old World:

From the Mayflower Compact to the Declaration of Independence, the idea of America is crucial to English Whigs and dissenters as . . . the place in which English liberties might survive should they disappear altogether from England. (Gravil 20)

Such sentiments are extremely transatlantic in nature. Yet no matter how Europeans viewed America, the rising concept of American distinctiveness shows that the concept of America as merely an extension of Europe was bound, at least to some extent, to be a transient evaluation.

Cultural independence did not follow hard upon political independence. The embryonic American voice was initially seen as anything but unique. Many EAL writers were described as mimicking the British style of prose and indeed James Fenimore Cooper was often described as the Walter Scott of the New World. Irving's *The Sketch-Book* (1819/20), container of those two seemingly quintessential American works, "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," is mostly comprised of tales of the English countryside, landmarks and traditions. Even Emerson was characterized by Francis Bowen, in an 1837 issue of *The Christian Examiner*, as possessing no innovation and simply reflecting other European voices.

Views on cultural separation would vary greatly. Mathew Arnold dismissed the concept of cultural separation by stating, "The Americans of the United States are English people on the other side of the Atlantic" (72), while cultural separation was not only acknowledged but even lamented by Goldwin Smith, "Though we rejoice in the birth of the American Republic, [we] must toll the bell of mourning for the schism in the Anglo-Saxon race" (7). In the Preface to *Stories of American Life: By American Writers* (1830), Mary Russell Mitford says of Irving that "his writings are essentially European" (iv). Yet this contrasts sharply with Irving's own analysis of the need for a distinct national literature:

We would rather hear our victories celebrated in the merest dogerel that sprang from native invention, than beg, borrow, or steal from others, the thoughts and words in which

to express our exultation. By tasking our own powers, and relying entirely on ourselves, we shall gradually improve and rise to poetical independent. (Response 245)

This does not sound like one whose aim was to write like an Englishman. Obviously, these various observations demonstrate that a sense of nationality ran parallel with transnationalism. Although transatlanticism is a twentieth-century academic concept, the above comments by Mitford and Irving demonstrate that this dichotomy, with which transatlantic literary studies must contend, definitely existed in the nineteenth century. “British and American cultural narratives tended to develop not so much in opposition but rather as heretical alternatives to each other” (Giles, *Transatlantic* 2). Richard Gravil characterizes this parallel literary chronology, simultaneously entwining and diverging, as “division and dualism” (2-3).

The influences exerted during this period, as transatlantic studies would come to point out, was not a one-way street. In a mutual appraisal, Richard Milnes, acknowledges in *The London and Westminster Review* (1840) the influence of Thomas Carlyle on Emerson, but also points out the intellectual sympathy Emerson’s work created in England for America. It is this reciprocity that transatlanticism seeks to uncover:

Rather than just playing off an ‘American’ Washington Irving against an ‘English’ Jane Austen, this paradoxical perspective [transatlanticism] works to transform both sides of the equation equally, representing a different Austen in the light of Britain’s conflict with America and a different Irving in the light of his nostalgia for England. (Giles, *Transatlantic* 14)

European voices, other than the British, would be much quicker to articulate a clear cultural distinction in the young United States. When foreign observers, J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur (*Letters from An American Farmer*, 1782) and Alexis de Tocqueville (*Democracy in America*, 1835), wrote about the fledgling United States, they immediately noticed an entirely different social strata from Europe:

What impressed observers most about the societies of colonial British American...what seemed most exceptional about them in comparison with those of Europe, was the fact that the entire top of the European status order was missing. (Greene 107)

The exact same condition could, however, be viewed quite differently:

The absence of masters in the American nation, at least among white men and in the free states, remained for a large body of English opinion the central flaw of both the American political as well as the social system. (Mulvey 164)

In other words, what today we would see as a strength, and arguably a promotion of American exceptionalism, was actually perceived by the British as an inferiority.

Feelings of superiority and inferiority between the erstwhile colonizers and colonized contributed significantly to the “call” for a national literature in America.<sup>16</sup> “The pride in the superiority of the American and the American nation was . . . an expression of a fear of the inferiority of the American and the American nation” (Mulvey 6). Earl Bradsher describes how many like-minded influential Americans of the 1820s believed that “the weight of European prestige . . . was too entirely crushing” (279), for American literature to ever emerge from its shadow. In this case, inferiority was grounded in the lack of a “usable past” (Spencer 14) as source material. There were also those who questioned not only the feasibility but also the wisdom of seeking a national literature. “We doubt whether we show our wisdom in making direct and conscious efforts to create an American literature . . . Literature is never to be sought as an end . . . A real national literature is always the spontaneous expression of the national life” (Brownson 19:18-19).

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<sup>16</sup> Perhaps the greatest division between America and Great Britain was the problem of slavery. While the anti-slavery movement played a key role in defining national identity, on both sides of the Atlantic, the gap between abolition in Great Britain and in the United States generated considerable transatlantic tension. Even though the mother country had been the instigator of the slave trade, by the early nineteenth century, divergence on the issue of emancipation encouraged a sense of British superiority.

It was into this atmosphere of cultural antagonism that the call for a national literature would emerge. “Shall America be only an echo of what is thought and written under the aristocracies beyond the ocean?” (Channing 262). If the answer was to be *no*, “if the Muses were to be trained to the American air . . . they would of necessity acquire an American accent” (Spencer 7). The challenge for a national literature was dramatically expressed by Noah Webster, “Americans, unshackle your minds and act like independent beings” (77).<sup>17</sup> Charles Brockden Brown praised “those lines and hues in which we differ, rather than those in which we resemble our kindred nations beyond the ocean” (202). Margret Fuller was more explicit:

It does not follow because many books are written by persons born in America that there exists an American literature. Books which imitate or represent the thoughts and life of Europe do not constitute an American literature. Before such can exist, an original idea must animate this nation and fresh currents of life must call into life fresh thoughts along its shores. (2:122)

Yet the most contentious expression was by Melville who wrote, “No American writer should write like an Englishman, or a Frenchman; let him write like a man, for then he will write like an American” (“Hawthorne” 146).

While the Puritan origins played their role, it was the Transcendentalists, whose rejection of those origins, as well as rejection of Rationalism and the Enlightenment, sought to explore the relationship between nature and the individual, that most contributed to a distinct national voice. Grounded in a new Unitarian faith, “transcendentalism was at its core both literary and spiritual” (Fulton 399). These writers both emancipated and nationalized American literature by celebrating the value of the individual (Higginson 8-9). They did not, however, create this exaltation of the *self*, but inherited it from European Romanticism, along with a refutation of

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<sup>17</sup> Webster’s essay “Education of Youth” first appeared in *American Magazine* in May 1788.

empiricism—thus demonstrating a transatlantic element to the American Renaissance. However, the transcendentalists took the Romanticism of their English cousins, William Blake, William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and created a unique “fusion of form and content” (Matthiessen vii).

The celebration of the American Romantic by Emerson and Thoreau becomes a journey into the dark side of human experience with Melville and Hawthorne (not to mention Poe). “Conceptions of the relation of the individual to society, and of the nature of good and evil . . . [rise] to their fullest development in the treatment of tragedy” (Matthiessen xiv). Although Matthiessen is describing all Transcendentalists, the idea of tragedy is particularly fitting to Hawthorne and Melville. “Not ignoring what is good, I am quick to perceive a horror” (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 22). This approach to the dysfunctional possibilities of Man and Nature created works of American fiction that possess a great deal of ambiguity, as we shall see in further detail in Chapters One and Four.

The American Renaissance has been criticized for conflating New England literature with American literature, thus characterizing these voices as extremely regional. For instance, the Puritan view of the New World as God’s hostile test contrasts sharply with the Southern view of “material plenty . . . [and] Edenic lushness . . . The Southern myth was essentially utopian” (Bercovitch, *Puritan* 137). Randolph Bourne characterizes the South as being “the most distinctively ‘American’” (277), but he also acknowledges this region to be the most Anglo-Saxon, thus, intentionally or not, defending the notion that New England was more culturally distinct from Great Britain than the South.

What makes the authors of the Renaissance distinct is first the elevation of the regional to the national and then the national to the universal. “Nationality is a good thing,” said Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in 1849, “to a certain extent, but universality is better” (115). This sentiment was shared by William Story in 1844: “Who speaks his own truth, speaks the truth of all” (44), and echoed by Whitman, “what I assume you shall assume” (25). Furthermore, by introducing the concept of the Over-soul, a divine spirit encompassing all humans, Emerson makes the ultimate appeal to universalism. For the transcendentalists, the idea of nationalism is inexorably entwined with universal truths.

In the first half of the twentieth century, the academic world made a concerted effort to validate the legitimacy of the concept of national literature. This meant that literary studies examined aspects of national exceptionalism, even if that precise term was not employed, before it analyzed American literature through a transatlantic lens. The most significant contributor to the concept of American exceptionalism is F.O. Matthiessen. In his 1941 work *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*, he asserts that five authors, Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Melville and Hawthorne, constituted an American *Renaissance* in literature.<sup>18</sup> The image of American exceptionalism, as expressed by Matthiessen’s “renaissance,” gave rise, initially, to a very limited canon, one that, for many,

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<sup>18</sup> Matthiessen’s use of the term “renaissance” has caused some consternation. Dr. Ann Woodlief, professor of American literature at Virginia Commonwealth University, explains Matthiessen’s use of the phrase:

It is a misnomer, if one thinks of the period as a time of rebirth of some earlier literary greatness . . . because there was nothing to be ‘reborn.’ The great writers of this period . . . marked the first maturing of American letters. It was a renaissance in the sense of a flowering . . . a literature which was distinctively American and not British. (n.p.)



would be too exclusive. Over the last forty years, the canon of EAL has been continually distended in the name of an ever-increasing desire for inclusiveness.

The first endeavor at expanding EAL actually predates Matthiessen's canon and yet is also one of the major contributors to American exceptionalism. Perry Miller's *The New England Mind* (1939) is one of the earliest academic advocacies for including colonial and specifically Puritan voices in EAL. Miller brought attention to the role that the writings of the Puritan fathers played in developing the American identity. The importance of the Puritan heritage was disputed even back in the nineteenth century.<sup>19</sup> However, in modern criticism, Gravit's summation of American exceptionalism bolsters Miller's perspective<sup>20</sup>:

The first touch of American soil, or even the anticipation of it, seems to have inspired Englishmen with the egalitarian impulses. John Smith, in his *Description of New England* (1616) emphasized the delights of a land where men would prosper if content to rely on their own merits, because rank, wealth, status, and privilege did not exist... With hindsight, American independence was inevitable from the moment John Winthrop, citing Moses at the end of his mid-Atlantic sermon, figured England as a place of bondage and corruption, and Anne Bradstreet<sup>21</sup> figured New England as an alternative to, rather than makes an extension of, Old. (9)

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<sup>19</sup> In 1839, in a speech at Brown University, Orestes Brownson denied that colonial writing possessed any unique Americanness. "They gloried in calling themselves Englishmen, and whatever was English was right in their eyes . . . we thought as the English thought, wrote as the English wrote" (Brownson 19:25-26). In 1879, however, Moses Coit Tyler disagreed in that he did hear a distinct voice. "Did the people of New England in their earliest age begin to produce a literature? Who can doubt it? With . . . so much both of common and of uncommon culture among them" (110).

<sup>20</sup> Although this statement sounds incredibly pro-exceptionalism, Gravit's *Romantic Dialogues* (2000) actually advocates the comparative and synthesizing modes of literary analysis, which practically defines transatlanticism.

<sup>21</sup> Anne Bradstreet was a Puritan woman who wrote poetry in the mid-seventeenth century. While she is careful to never openly criticize her religious culture, her verse is, nonetheless, extremely personal and even emotional. Her mixing of personal sentiments with an unquestioning role of God's tests and trials makes for an unusual kind of Puritan writing and can even be seen as a precursor to Hawthorne's trouble with his early New England heritage. Bradstreet's earthly pinings can also be seen as the earliest rumblings of a specific attribute of the developing American literature, which would, by the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, creep from its religious origins to a more secular aesthetic.

By 1975, in *The Puritan Origins of the American Self*, Sacvan Bercovitch was still arguing for the validity of the early New England voices and saw the Puritan role in the defining of the American identity as a fusion “of sainthood and nationality” (89).<sup>22</sup> However, in 2000, Michael Warner developed a slightly different view. While he still valued these early writings, he saw the linking of them to a national identity as problematic. “Nationalist criticism blurs the issue insofar as it tries to view colonial writers as distinctively American” (67). Nonetheless, the heritage of the Puritan New World view exists in both Emerson and Thoreau, whose literature bears witness to the Puritan paradox—“exaltation of the individual and the search for a perfect community” (Bercovitch, *Puritan* 176).

The extending of EAL to include the “earliest writings” would prove problematic in many ways, and not just to the notion of national exceptionalism. “Much of what offers itself as the beginnings of American literature is scarcely ‘literary’ at all . . . or if it is, it nevertheless is not very good literature” (Colacurcio 111). Indeed, “earliest writings” includes diaries, journals, sermons and essays, formats which are certainly less artistic than poetry and novels. Such inclusions also bring about many definitional questions. Does American literature include texts written by Englishmen before there was even a nation called America? In other words, can there be a national literature before there is even a nation? Does American Literature have to be about America? Does it have to be physically written in America? If the answer to the last two queries is “yes,” then Irving’s *Tales of the Alhambra* (1832), which is both about Spain and written in

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<sup>22</sup> In the preface to his 2011 edition of *The Puritan Origins of the American Self*, Bercovitch’s would expound on his view of exceptionalism: “To become American was to be spiritually reborn, your old identity washed away in transit to the New World. The American self that emerged was your own, liberated from the restrictions and constrictions of the past...in accordance with the prospects of renewal and open opportunity of a New World” (xxi).

Spain, is **not** American literature.<sup>23</sup> In *Messy Beginnings* (2003), Malini Johar Schueller and Edward Watts address the problems of canonical definition. In their view, “American cultural history has always been a contradictory set of narratives depicting an endless entanglement of imperial and colonial experiences and identities” (5). Are texts written about the New World but in a language other than English, such as those written by early Spanish explorers, American literature? What if we include stories of indigenous inhabitants in American literature? Those do not originate in English either. After all, traditionally speaking, English literature does not typically study the works of Victor Hugo or Leo Tolstoy—the rationale being that the study of literature does not deal only with plots and characters, but with the author’s manipulation of prose or verse—subtleties that are difficult to translate. Furthermore, oral tradition since not written is strictly speaking not literature.

Schueller and Watts put forth the essential question at the heart of American Exceptionalism: “Is the nation a hegemonically conceived space of Anglo conquest (an extension of Europe), or is it categorically separate from its purported genetic and intellectual forebears?” (3). Not only is this, in a general sense, the conflict at the heart of exceptionalism versus transatlanticism, but it also, in a very specific sense, the crux of Hawthorne’s literary wrestling. Does America hold a unique place in the world and in history? American exceptionalism would answer in the affirmative. Transatlanticism, however, being a form of multi-culturalism, would

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<sup>23</sup> Despite what scholars of English literature might think, it could be argued that the murky beginnings to American literature are not unique. English literary studies begin with *Beowulf*, which, while we do have a written text, is thought to originate from oral tradition and, while written in a language that evolved into Modern English, for all intents and purposes, Old English is a foreign tongue. Furthermore, many great medieval manuscripts, such as those by Bede and Geoffrey of Monmouth are actually in Latin.

see any such assertions as cultural elitism. Such polarity would seem to suggest that the two academic approaches are mutually exclusive. This dissertation asserts otherwise.

Transatlantic Studies seeks to explore the intertextuality between two canons typically studied as separate entities. “To read British and American literature comparatively . . . to read national literatures in a transnational way is . . . to suggest the various forms of contingency that have entered into the formation of each naturalized inheritance” (Giles, *Transatlantic* 1), and to view the Atlantic World, of that period, as a shared cultural community. Transatlanticism points out that 1760-1860 is a period in which ideas flowed freely across the ocean and were part of bidirectional influence.<sup>24</sup> As Laura Stevens points out, scholars are “fascinated now by the ocean as a source of both separation and connection” (93). This idea of *permeable boundaries* appears as early as 1890 in *Problems of Greater Britain*, in which Charles Wentworth Dilke suggests that these two distinct countries can actually be seen as one cohesive culture. This is precisely the kind of “difference-bridging” that this dissertation seeks to achieve between EAL and classical Hollywood cinema.

The literary influences on EAL from writing prior to the American Renaissance, as well as influences beyond the shores of the United States, goes to the heart of transatlantic studies and as such would seem to clash head-on with American exceptionalism. In the beginning, transatlantic literary studies focused specifically on the literature of the United States and Great

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<sup>24</sup> Two of the largest reasons for this increased cultural flow were advancements in the speed at which the Atlantic was crossed, and lax, or even non-existent, international copyright laws (the Berne Convention tightens these laws in 1886). However, the latter also fueled the desire for national uniqueness. According to Earl Bradsher, “the books of European origin . . . dumped on our shores . . . being read in preference to our authors spread a message antagonistic to true Americans . . . they are not of us nor for us. Their problems are not our problems; their life is not our life; their ideals are not our ideals” (286).

Britain.<sup>25</sup> There were, at the same time, those voices that could be described as defending exceptionalism.<sup>26</sup> However, as transatlantic interpretations of EAL expanded, it would become the dominant academic perspective and even broaden to include far more than just British and American literature.<sup>27</sup> In 2011, a collection of essays entitled *Re-Framing the Transnational Turn in American Studies* purported that the widening of scholarly efforts to obscure national boundaries decreased the concept of “us and them” and exposed “the limits of a ‘national American imaginary,’ often identified with American exceptionalism” (viii). Likewise, in

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<sup>25</sup> In *Anglo-American Encounters* (1981), Benjamin Lease explores the attraction American writers displayed for the British culture, all the while seeking cultural liberation. In 1982, Jay Fliegelman’s *Prodigals and Pilgrims* compares the American and British relationship to that of a parent and child. Also, in 1982, Marilyn Butler’s *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries* makes the structuralist argument that Romanticism of 1760-1830 produced a literature of political consciousness. The next year, in 1983, William Spengemann writes *Discovering the Literature of British America*, which stresses a close connection between American literature and its British attachments. The aspect of transatlanticism that explores the concept of inadequacies on the part of the young United States is the crux of Christopher Mulvey’s 1990 *Transatlantic Manners*.

<sup>26</sup> In 1986, Robert Weisbuch writes *Atlantic Double-Cross*, stressing the rise of American literary nationalism as a conscious attempt to escape British affiliation. Similarly, in 1993, in what could be viewed as anti-transatlanticism, Jack Greene defends many of the foundations of American exceptionalism in *The Intellectual Construction of America*.

<sup>27</sup> *The American Renaissance: New Dimensions* (1983), published by Harry Garvin and Peter Carafiol, contains essays that apply poststructural theory to reevaluate Matthiessen’s canon. In 1987, Nicholas Canny and Anthony Pagden put together a collection of essays entitled *Colonial Identity in the Atlantic World* that see ‘colonial identity’ as a commonality shared throughout the New World. In 1994, Spengemann writes *New World of Words: Redefining EAL* calling for an ever-increasing and inclusive concept of EAL. In 2002, Heidi Macpherson and Wil Kaufman assemble *New Perspectives in Transatlantic Studies*, with the goal of expanding the new field of transatlantic studies to include “contact zones” with globalization, law, economics, politics and philosophy. In 2009, Ralph Bauer writes the article, “The Literature of British America,” in which he criticizes the turn by EAL from its traditional basis in Puritan origins to the Old World concept of British American Literature, declaring that it merely “substituted one nationalist trope for another” (819). A year later, Bauer also writes “Early American Literature and American Literary History at the ‘Hemispheric Turn.’” Both articles argue for a global perspective for the study of American literature. Likewise, in the same year, Giles writes *Transnationalism in Practice*, in which he states, “A reconstructed American studies needs to acknowledge how interdisciplinary perspectives involve a blurring of definitions, a collapsing of frontiers, not a nationalistic synthesis” (34).

*Reimagining the Transatlantic, 1780-1890*, also written in 2011, Joselyn Almeida seeks to expand the "pan-Atlantic" approach to include non-Anglophone cultures.

Among these transnational voices, one deserves particular mention. In *Imagined Communities* (1991), Benedict Anderson argues that a nation is a socially constructed community since it is the result of the people's imagination. Transatlanticism rejects notions of cultural hierarchy and seeks to identify communities which exceed typical limits and barriers. Therefore, Anderson's "imagined communities," which transcend the concept of national borders, fits nicely within the view of the Atlantic world as a transnational community. In the "process of self-definition among the Atlantic colonial communities . . . there was, first, the fact of the sea crossing itself, creating a sense of physical and even psychological separation from the mother country" (Elliott, Introduction 7). Thus, "in spite of the marked differences between two colonizing powers, the settler communities which they established had a number of characteristics and problems in common" (Elliott, Introduction 3). In this sense, Anne Bradstreet represents an example of an imagined community—that of all colonial woman who braved the oceanic crossing to start a brave new world. Furthermore, Giles expresses Anderson's ideas in a poststructural tone: "Conceptions of national identity [are] divided and unstable" (*Transatlantic* 14). Unfortunately, such a perspective has incredible potential for divisiveness. From a political standpoint, it alienates those who cite exceptionalism as still being a viable avenue of analysis. In addition, to see the entire Atlantic as one community, irrespective of even language barriers, also diminishes the unique role that the British-American relationship plays in transatlanticism.

Eric Sundquist laments that despite a widening transnational view of America, there are still too many instances of the myth of exceptionalism. To illustrate the enduring legacy of exceptionalism, Sundquist refers to Norman Mailer's 1969 observation of "the core of some magnetic human force called Americanism" (Mailer 315). To Sundquist's dismay, Mailer proclaims that this *force* "had emerged from human history in order to take us to the stars . . . [that this force was a] strong, severe, Christian, missionary, hell-raising, hypocritical, ideologically simple, patriotic, stingy, greedy, God-fearing, nature-despoiling, sense-destroying, logic-making, technology-deploying, brave human machine" (316). Either Mailer means this description to be tongue-in-cheek, or he is the direct literary descendent of the early Puritan writers.

The answer to these two outwardly combative perspectives lies in the very nature of intertextuality itself. In a semiotic approach to transatlantic literary studies of the nineteenth century, American literature and British literature cease to be distinct endeavors, or derivative endeavors, or even reciprocal endeavors, but rather as mutual signifiers, or incarnations, of some shared signified, or in neo-platonic terms, a shared "greater truth." In this sense, the "permeable boundaries" of a semiotic approach both aid and thwart the concept of American exceptionalism in EAL, since signifiers are simultaneously distinct from each other but also indistinguishable from each other in their significance.

### **Classic Hollywood Cinema**

As with Early American Literature, different critics have defined classic Hollywood by different parameters. Does classic Hollywood begin with Porter, with Griffith, with the style of late silent films or with the advent of sound? Does it end with the demise in power of the studio

system or with the rise of non-linear narratives? Beyond the debatable dates, the most common definition of classic Hollywood is a studio system of production that employed a star system and reliance on film genres to establish, predict and satisfy audience expectations. Despite variations on the time period, most film analysts hold certain aspects in common. Thomas Schatz tells us:

The Hollywood studio system emerged during the teens . . . took its distinctive shape in the 1920s . . . reached maturity during the 1930s . . . but . . . decline[d] after the war, done in by various factors, from government antitrust suits and federal tax laws to new entertainment forms and massive changes in American lifestyles . . . Gone was the industrial infrastructure, the ‘integrated’ system whose major studio powers not only produced and distributed movies, but also ran their own theater chains. (*Genius* 4)

Similarly, Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell saw the classical style as standardized in the teens; “its systems and relations among systems have changed relatively little since, and even many of its devices, like shot/reverse shot, have changed only slightly” (62). Schatz reminds us that over the course of the 1920s, “the American motion picture industry . . . became the nation’s—and indeed much of the world’s—preferred form of entertainment” (“Hollywood” 167), indicating the national significance of classic Hollywood. The other great significance is the suggestion that classic Hollywood constructed, or at least refined the very “grammar” of film. Indeed, Andre Bazin agrees that “from 1930 to 1940, there seems to have grown up in the world, originating largely in the United States, a common form of cinematic language” (1:28). To define cinema as language requires some explanation:

One might suppose that the ‘grammar’ of cinema is a rhetoric rather than a true grammar, since the minimum unit (the shot) is not determined, and consequently codification can affect only the larger units . . . Why do filmic orderings that are codified and significant constitute a grammar? Because they organize not only filmic connotation, but also, and primarily, denotation. (Metz, *Film* 117)

What then are the components of this language?



A key, but arguably superficial, commonality between film and the novel is a claim to realism. When it comes to depicting inner emotions, realism, be it in the novel or on screen, was always a bit difficult. At first, the novel attempted to solve this with first-person narration and even the epistolary format, but eventually the development of the omniscient, third person narrator would be the development to which cinema would be most beholden. There is an irrefutable similarity between the omniscient narrator in literature and the role of the camera in film.<sup>28</sup> However, for the film-novel comparison to be truly valid, cinema would have to develop beyond the limited theatrical perspective of Georges Méliès. In 1903, Edwin Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* was the first film to exhibit parallel editing, i.e. cross-cutting between scenes to give the impression of simultaneous action, which was a tremendous step forward from filmed stage entertainments. Despite this advancement, Porter had not yet discovered one of the major components of film grammar. He had not discovered the *shot* within the *scene*. This development would be the province of D. W. Griffith, the name that is most often cited as defining the language of film.<sup>29</sup> Griffith's editing began to imitate a "near-subliminal, stream-of-consciousness flow . . . [and by so doing, he] was coming very close to a replication of the workings of the human mind and imagination itself" (Giannetti 23). Furthermore, the shot was

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<sup>28</sup> See Christian Metz' *The Imaginary Signifier*, pp. 45-48. There is a striking similarity between Metz' description of the camera and Bordwell's concept of the "invisible observer" (Bordwell 24) with Ralph Waldo Emerson's "transparent eyeball" (*Centenary* 1:10) – absorbent not reflective. This suggests a connection between film and, not just the novel, but specifically with "renaissance" EAL.

<sup>29</sup> Eisenstein puts forth specificity in the novel-film connection by comparing Griffith with Charles Dickens in terms of the use of "closeups" to highlight details and alter emphasis (*Form* 213). In terms of montage, Eisenstein also compares Griffith to Dickens in their utilization of parallel action (*Form* 205). "We feverishly followed his [Dickens'] characters from page to page, watching his characters now being rubbed from view at the most critical moment, then seeing them return afresh between the separate links of the parallel plot" (Eisenstein, *Form* 201).

not only “the basic unit of material” but also the “basic unit of production” (Bordwell et al. 60), thus the term *classic Hollywood* refers to both a style and process.<sup>30</sup>

Despite the discovery of the shot, most films of the 1920s were extremely static and distant from the viewer with a “tendency toward tableaux and a dislike of intense close-ups” (Giannetti 42), a perspective that still mimicked the theatre. The freeing up of the camera via more and more elaborate movement, as well as staging action in greater depth, would describe the evolution of cinema from the 1920s to the 1930s. The latter, staging in depth, was the contribution of immigrant filmmakers like Erich von Stroheim, and Josef von Sternberg. Not all foreign influences, however, enhanced a sense of realism. German Expressionism, as imported by directors like F. W. Murnau, would also influence the visual style of classic Hollywood’s early horror films and, later, film noir. However, perhaps the greatest influence on the classic Hollywood style came from the development of Soviet montage. This is a decided move away from realism and toward formalism. The theory of montage suggests that the juxtaposing of radically different shots creates meaning in the mind of the observer that is not inherent in either shot. This formalistic approach adheres to the notion that art is not art until it is manipulated. With montage, the process of filmmaking is laid bare and as such clashes with the proposed purpose of classic Hollywood’s so-called “invisible” style.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, although never copying the formalistic extremes of Soviet montage, American films throughout the thirties

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<sup>30</sup> “Classical Hollywood cinema was more than the sum of its films . . . [it] implies a suprapersonal system, a long-standing set of practices and norms, it applies as much to its industrial infrastructure as it does to the nature of its films” (Neale 2).

<sup>31</sup> The invisible style attempts to cover the filmmaking process. Such techniques as cutting on motion are meant therefore to help the viewer become lost in the narrative. In classic Hollywood, technique is subordinate to story. The “certain tendency,” in classic Hollywood, which Robert Ray wrote about, is “the systematic subordination of every cinematic element to the interests of a movie’s narrative” (32).

would continually incorporate editing in more and more segmented ways.<sup>32</sup> This assimilation testifies to an attribute of classic Hollywood in which slight variations can be incorporated without extreme violations of the language which the system created.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, while American film was certainly developing a unique voice, it was equally influenced by transnational elements. This transnational characteristic shows commonality between classic Hollywood and EAL, but there is also a similarity in transtemporal influences. Just as EAL can stretch back to Puritan writings, and perhaps even further, so too does the classic Hollywood style, as manifested in the sound era, exhibit influences as far back as Porter and Griffith.

To what extent then can the classic Hollywood style be associated with the advent of sound? Eisenstein believed that montage is a universal phenomenon (*Sense 7*). Eisenstein, at least at his most montage-driven, is predominantly known for silent films. As such, it was easy for him to suggest that, like music, film could be a universal form of communication. This claim is based on the visuality of cinema. Once sound arrived, film became immediately connected with the spoken word and therefore linked to a specific culture. Even Vachel Lindsay, who saw film as a universal language—he, in fact, equated cinema with hieroglyphics—admitted that this transnational art form should have a national inflection: “We must have Whitmanesque scenarios” (57).

The sound era did not destroy the earlier foundations of film grammar, rather they focused such rules and codified them as the standards of the art form. Despite his praise for

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<sup>32</sup> See Chapter One, pp. 42-43.

<sup>33</sup> “The Hollywood system built into itself a need to balance standardization and differentiation” (Thompson 62). The structural process of classic Hollywood may have resembled aspects of mass production, but in order for continued consumption, no two products could be totally identical only, at best, narratively similar.

silent film's contribution to the language of film, Bazin nonetheless places a high status on the sound era when he says that "it came not to destroy but to fulfill the Old Testament of the cinema" (1:23). Still, many saw the arrival of sound as retarding the advances of directors like Murnau, von Stroheim, and von Sternberg. The camera was, at least initially, forgotten in favor of the microphone and artistic innovation was made subordinate to new technology. In this sense, the classic Hollywood style, as solidified in the 1930s, was a "reawakening" of the level of style and techniques of narrative that had existed before the advent of sound.<sup>34</sup> Revival or not, it became clear that "narrative strategies and stylistic techniques . . . developed during the silent era [were] modified and augmented during the early years of sound" (Jewell 152). By 1932, improvements in sound technology meant that "actors no longer had to move gingerly or to slowly enunciate their dialogue, and the lugubrious pace of many early talkies gave way to a livelier rhythm" (Thompson and Bordwell 219). Most of all, the arrival of sound was instrumental to the classic Hollywood style in a heightened sense of continuity, which the editing of dialog sequences required. Even if many of the elements of film grammar were established in the silent era, the invisible style, which classic Hollywood professed to seek, could never truly be implemented with the intrusions of title cards. Dialogue cemented the continuity editing that silent film had instigated. After a wide shot of two characters talking, classic style "dictates" a cut to a single shot of one of the speakers, and, when the other character responds, to then cut to that speaker. It is axiomatic. It is intuitive. The continuity, based on cause-and-effect, is fulfilled in the requirements of sound editing. "Sound technology merely provided the final

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<sup>34</sup> By calling the sound era of classic Hollywood a 'reawakening,' it can well be compared to that period of EAL which Matthiessen referred to a "renaissance."

element in a continuity system that had been evolving since the early days of the silents” (Ray 55).

The most prominent feature of classic Hollywood, at least according to Bordwell, is heavy emphasis on narrative causality, but this characteristic, as suggested earlier, presents an impediment to the link between EAL and classic Hollywood. For Bordwell, classic Hollywood was defined by psychological conflict, goal-driven characters and the causality that arises from these; “causality is the armature of the classical story” (Bordwell et al. 13). The image of narration as a chain of cause-and-effect does not only apply at the level of the scene, but even at the level of the shot. “Classical editing aims at making each shot the logical outcome of its predecessor” (Bordwell 27), in other words, “each scene is planned to lead the audience on to the next” (Emerson and Loos 48), much in the same way that a specific note in a melody seems to our sense of logical order to be the only possible note to follow the note before it. This observation binds classic Hollywood tightly to the narrative-driven, nineteenth-century British novel, and not to the more reflective, emotionally explorative, American Romances of the same period, namely Hawthorne and Melville.

However, the theory that narrative causality is the dominant feature of classic Hollywood is not unchallenged. Richard Maltby sees “spectacle” as the motivating force behind films. In other words, you go to the movies to watch singing and dancing, if you like musicals; you go to laugh, if you like comedies, and to see explosions, chases and fights, if you like action movies—all of which can and do take place without advancing the plot:

Hollywood narration must negotiate the pleasurable interruptions of performance or spectacle before reasserting itself in order to bring them...to an end. The two elements of storytelling and spectacle are held in an essential tension and the movie exists as a series of minor victories of one logic over the other. (Maltby 399)

This tension between causality and entertaining digressions is one that even Bordwell acknowledges. Typically, in classic Hollywood, only the opening credits and perhaps the first few moments, when overt narration is employed, present self-consciousness. It is also true that very early in the sound era, films continued the silent screen habit of excessive and intrusive title cards. Bordwell sees these as exceptions to his view of narrative driven by linear cause-and-effect. However, another exception is the mystery, in which “causes” might be withheld from the audience; another is the musical, in which a singer might directly address the audience.<sup>35</sup> The point, as even Bordwell admits, is that “classical narration is . . . not equally ‘invisible’ in every type of film nor throughout any one film” (Bordwell 23).

It is difficult, due to intrusive techniques such as dissolves, crane shots and montage sequences, to ever accurately label the classic Hollywood style as truly “invisible.” “‘Invisible’ may suffice as a rough description of how little most viewers notice technique, but it does not get us very far if we want to analyze how classical films work” (Bordwell et al. 25). The French film *The Rules of the Game* (1939) demonstrates, by comparison, just how unrealistic the supposed “invisible” Hollywood style really is. Indeed the very placement of the camera, without employing motion or editing, manipulates perspective.<sup>36</sup> The so-called realistic Hollywood style of the “invisible hand” is actually a very constructed and manipulated style,

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<sup>35</sup> The musical number in many ways may be seen as the descendent of the theater’s soliloquy, a break from narrative causality for reflection. Therefore, a connection could also be drawn to Melville’s musings.

<sup>36</sup> Here then is perhaps the greatest connection between literature and film and how both deviate from theater. Even though techniques such as moving down stage and spotlighting can attempt to direct audience attention, the theatrical spectator is free to view anywhere they wish and perspective varies widely depending on where the viewer is seated. Conversely, in literature, the reader can only know what the author tells them; similarly, in cinema, the viewer can only see what the camera captures and all visual perspectives are uniform.

despite its claims to “realism.” Realism in film prefers the shot staged in depth as oppose to montage, but a shot staged in depth is also a noticeable construct or artifice, with very little in terms of its composition that can be called realistic. This results in a style which is a strange combination of subjectivity and objectivity. Classic Hollywood creates a verisimilitude - to manipulate the audience in more subtle ways that are neither purely realistic nor formalistic, “alternately revealing and withholding information” (Price 40).<sup>37</sup> This concept of cinema as a hybridization between formalism and realism is explored in great detail in Chapter One.

Just as 1760-1860 in EAL displays the emergence of a uniquely American literary voice, so too the age of classic Hollywood stamps forever the American voice on film<sup>38</sup> and would become, despite much later influences such as Italian Neo-Realism and the French New Wave, the yardstick by which adherence to and deviation from would be measured and subsequent generations and styles would be judged.<sup>39</sup> As Ray writes, “The movies traded on one opposition in particular, American culture’s traditional dichotomy of individual and community” (58). In that sense, it is easy to see American film, like American literature, tracing its origins all the way back to the earliest Puritan writings. In addition, an even stronger connection lies in the fact that “the American Cinema’s version of . . . traditional mythology rested on . . . the audience’s sense of American exceptionalism” (Ray 56). In other words, both EAL and classic Hollywood share

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<sup>37</sup> Price’s comment was not about film, but about Whitman.

<sup>38</sup> “The formation of classic Hollywood...effected a new continuity with American culture” (Ray 32).

<sup>39</sup> “Hollywood's Classic Period films would establish the definition of the medium itself. Henceforth, different ways of making movies would appear as aberrations from some ‘intrinsic essence of cinema’ rather than simply as alternatives to a particular form...[and] set the terms by which all movies, made before or after, would be seen” (Ray 26).

the common bond of creating and promoting a strong, and culturally unique, national identity—or at least the myth of such an identity.

### **American Literature and American Film – A Concerted Effort at Nationalism**

The single greatest similitude between EAL and classic Hollywood is the overt desire and effort in both periods to create a national identity through the claiming of an art form for national purposes. The idea that such effort can be described as “propaganda” is explored more fully in Chapter Three. Whether the term applies or not, it is clear that the battle to promote nationalism in American literature did not end in the early nineteenth century. It was resurrected in the early twentieth century by an academic movement that is, intended or not, firmly based in American exceptionalism. “The academic study of early American literature emerged in this [twentieth] century to help justify the separation of American from English literature by creating a native tradition for our national treasures” (Spengemann, “Discovering” 6). At the same time that Hollywood was making film a distinct “American” art form, American literature was also on a crusade, once again, to advance itself as a unique American voice.

Until the 1920s, American literary scholars were concerned mostly with British authors, which sounds much like conditions in the first part of the nineteenth century. It was not until the 1880s that Dartmouth College offered the first course in American literature, followed by Smith College and Wellesley and by the 1890s, thirteen universities had begun to carry graduate courses in American literature (Vanderbilt 110, 128). Elizabeth Renker explains that much of the impediment to advancing the cause of American literature in schools was the old inferior feelings on the part of Americans toward their own culture (1-3). The same hesitations were voiced in the early nineteenth century. This cultural bias, however, is somewhat diluted when



we “remember that English literature was not firmly certified as a college subject at Oxford until 1894” (Vanderbilt 194).

The swell of patriotism which followed the end of the First World War was closely connected to the increase in American literature as a serious academic pursuit, and the endorsement of a national literature would have many prominent advocates. In 1920, using the French as an example, Bourne states, “This cultural chauvinism is the most harmless of patriotism; indeed, it is absolutely necessary for a true civilization. And it can hardly be too intense, or too exaggerated” (40-41).<sup>40</sup> Then, in 1927, Vernon Louis Parrington published *Main Currents in American Thought: An Interpretation of American Literature from the Beginnings to 1920*, which was, until the rise of the New Criticism in the 1940s, “one of the most influential and highly regarded texts in literature, history and American Studies” (Hall vii).

World War II powerfully reinforced existing tendencies toward cultural nationalism [and] gave great prominence to the ideological dimension of American identity . . . and forged a link between the democratic ideology and the idea of culture that became central to the American Studies approach. (Gleason 344)

This twentieth-century effort to promote a national literature, culminating with Matthiessen’s “American Renaissance,” is concurrent with the rise of classic Hollywood cinema. Both phenomena are situated appropriately in the second quarter of what Henry Luce termed the “American Century.” As Matthiessen would affirm, “The one common denominator of my five writers, uniting even Hawthorne and Whitman, was their devotion to the possibilities of democracy” (ix), and such a commitment is true of classic Hollywood as well.

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<sup>40</sup> In 1920, Bourne would not yet have known the ramifications of ultra-nationalism that fascism was to inflict on the world.

Just as the American Renaissance in literature sought to exert a unique American voice, distinct from the shadow of the literature of the mother country, so too was there a concerted effort on the part of classic Hollywood to make cinema uniquely American. Peter Decherney, in *Hollywood and the Cultural Elite* (2005), discusses this phenomenon in depth. He describes a collusion “of political and commercial brokering between Hollywood producers, on the one hand, and museum curators, university professors, and government officials on the other” (1). According to Decherney, each side saw an advantage in this collaboration. “Film didn’t become art until Hollywood moguls decided it was good business for film to become art and the leaders of American cultural institutions found it useful—politically useful—to embrace and promote Hollywood film” (Decherney 1). This mutualism can be summed up as follows:

Museums, universities, and government agencies embraced film and the film industry to maintain their hold on American art, education, and the idea of American identity itself. They formed partnerships with Hollywood in order to expand their reach to the swelling and increasingly diverse mass audience for art and entertainment...[and] the leaders of the film industry welcomed the opportunity to join forces with established institutions, because they saw it as a means of stabilizing their industry and retaining their new and tenuous hold on American popular culture. (Decherney 2-3)

Decherney further suggests that “the overwhelming identification of film with Hollywood and American culture is the result of commercial tactics and government intervention as much as it emanates from something in the films themselves” (3).

Obviously, this was a collaborative effort. On the Hollywood side, producer Jesse Lasky helped to establish America’s first film school at Columbia University (Decherney 6). On the side of cultural institutions, Decherney demonstrates the move to promote American film through the example of Iris Barry:

Barry . . . began her career by looking for films to serve as both a feminist canon and the roots of a British national film style. But personal ambitions were soon subsumed by

larger commercial and political tides. In the 1930s, Barry found herself as curator of film at the Museum of Modern Art and advisor to American government agencies and powerful private foundations. Charged with developing a method of using film to combat communist and fascist politics, she ended up as one of the most important individual forces in the campaign to Americanize Hollywood and use the film industry to promote American values abroad, precisely the opposite of her initial intention. (5)

Barry, who began by fearing the Americanization of the world, wound up contributing to it. In fact, she designed the Museum of Modern Art Film Library as a center for spreading American democracy through film (Decherney 7). Thus, cinema became a tangible tool for expressing the concept of “Americanism,”<sup>41</sup> much the same goal as many of the writers and critics of early nineteenth-century American literature. As with Whitman and *Mr. Smith*, both political and artistic tradition, and even American democracy itself, were to all be defined and promoted to the world.

The result of this effort, which included the creation of film collections by libraries and museums, the onset of film as an academic endeavor on college campus, and the support of government agencies, was a redefining of the American identity and by “turning popular film into an American art form . . . transform[ed] the everyday act of going to the movies into a civic ritual” (Decherney 2). So it was that a concerted effort on the part of Hollywood and various cultural institutions meant that “by the end of World War II, Hollywood had assumed its role as a national art form and a propagator of Americanism” (11). It is somewhat ironic that this movement by the “cultural elites” was an attempt to lionize that which is often characterized as strictly a populist art form—the movies.

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<sup>41</sup> The idea that Hollywood films were a tool for the promotion of “Americanism,” has a darker side. Many of the Hollywood moguls were Jewish and attempted to hide this fact from the public, because of a fear that their audiences would perceive their “foreign” influences as perverting American culture. William Randolph Hearst, in his attempt to squash *Citizen Kane*, threatened many studio executives with exposure of their heritage in his newspapers.

## Chapter Summaries

As we have seen, there are numerous parallels to be drawn between Early American Literature and that period of filmmaking called classical Hollywood cinema. Both eras bear the influences of preceding periods (Puritan writing and silent films) and foreign impact (British Romanticism and German Expressionism/Soviet montage). We have also seen that both epochs demonstrate that the “permeable boundaries” of semiotics and intertextuality stand in sharp contrast to American exceptionalism, and yet somehow strangely coexist. And lastly, but perhaps most significantly, both Early American Literature and classic Hollywood sought to appropriate their respective art forms in the promotion of nationalism. In short, the similarities between these periods are found both in congruity and dichotomy.

To further scrutinize this inter-period, inter-medium relationship, Chapter One, “Early American Literature Meets Classic Hollywood: *The Scarlet Letter* (1926/1934),” argues that a connection exists between the search for the American literary voice and the codification of film “grammar” via a formalist analysis of the 1850 Hawthorne novel and two early film versions of the same title. Classical Hollywood film, by combining elements of realism and formalism, mirrors attempts by literature, and especially American literature, to combine aspects of Romance and Realism. This explains Hawthorne’s insistence on classifying *The Scarlet Letter* as a Romance despite the text’s superficial resemblance to the developing literary genre of the novel. The 1934 film adaptation further highlights this conflict by bridging the developing “language of film” as defined by Hollywood, “the invisible hand,” and more “manipulated” filmmaking techniques such as montage. However, the main suggestion of this chapter is that hybridization is the main characteristic of both Hawthorne’s work and these film adaptations.

This chapter will also deal with the notion that both literature and film, and indeed the very concept of genre, almost immediately subvert their own newly set standards.

Chapter Two, “Romanticism and Disillusionment: the ‘Last Sigh of the Moor’ and *Lost Horizon* (1937)” compares and contrasts Irving’s *Tales of the Alhambra* (1832) with the film adaptation of James Hilton’s novel. This chapter argues that Romantic disillusionment, resulting from disaffection with one’s own culture, emerges in both texts as a flight to an alternate (even imaginary) society. Irving’s estrangement is juxtaposed with the 1937 film *Lost Horizon*, an atypical Frank Capra film. The main character of *Lost Horizon*, like Irving, is driven by dissatisfaction to lose himself in a utopian society. Both desires reflect a kind of “golden-ageism.” In the case of *Lost Horizon*, it is the fictitious paradise of Shangri-La; in the case of Irving, he harkens back to an idealized Moorish Spain. In addition, both fascinations can be characterized as “Orientalism” and for Irving, specifically *maurophilia*. To a large extent, both texts also “swim against the tide” of their time. In the case of *Lost Horizon*, the story possesses a transnational sentiment that stands in stark contrast to the abiding sense of isolationism that existed in the United States between the World Wars. Similarly, Irving’s writings in Spain were seen by many as an illustration that he had lost his Americanism. The comparison between this written text and this film brings into sharp contrast the transnational figure, Irving, and a champion of nationalism, Capra. This chapter also explores the concept of “imagined” communities and cultural appropriation.

Chapter Three, “Observed Lives: *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* and *Sergeant York* (1941),” compares the literary genre of the autobiography and the cinematic genre of the biopic. This chapter explores the divergence between historical and literary persona. This

chapter argues that both the written text and the film use a specific genre to mold, not only individual identity, but national identity as well. Franklin's *Autobiography* is situated at a time when political independence required that colonists stop thinking of themselves as British and begin thinking of themselves as American. Also positioned at a time of crisis, *Sergeant York* attempts to overcome a prevalence of isolationism in order to mutate rugged individualism into international citizenship. In exploring the mythological status of each work's main character, this chapter will determine whether or not the term *propaganda* applies to the rhetorical efforts of these two works.

Chapter Four, "Melville and Ford: Ahab and the Duke," will examine two iconic and arguably quintessential American figures and the role their "quest" plays in defining them. This chapter asserts that both *Moby-Dick* (1851) and *The Searchers* (1956) bear witness to the heavy influence the "frontier" played in defining the American character and the less than symbiotic relationship between Man and Nature—arguably the greatest distinction between British and American Romanticism. It also probes the notion of flawed exceptionalism and the creation of fictional figures that are ironically both admirable and diabolic, both hero and villain. As these proposed dualities suggest, ambiguity is the hallmark of both American Romanticism and more modern incarnations of the classic Hollywood Western.

By stressing the conflict between the forces of transnationalism and nationalism, this dissertation confirms the necessity for a hybridized approach to both EAL and classic Hollywood. It reveals two periods that lay in the liminal space between Romanticism and Realism and create images of identity that blur the definitions of heroism and villainy.

## Chapter One

### **Early American Literature Meets Classic Hollywood: *The Scarlet Letter* (1926/1934)**

The Introduction suggests that the most prominent reason for Hollywood's predilection for British literature as source material is an appetite for narrative causality and an aversion to conspicuous intrusion by the filmmaker.<sup>1</sup> Almost any top box-office earner from the 1930s, such as *King Kong* (1933), *It Happened One Night* (1934), *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1935), *Bringing up Baby* (1938), *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938), or *Stagecoach* (1939), or any of Universal's horror classics from the early thirties, or Warner Brother's gangster films, which bookended the decade, or certainly, the crowning jewels of 1939, *The Wizard of Oz* and *Gone with the Wind*, bear witness to classic Hollywood's love for plot-driven films. The studio era in American film had little time for the obtrusive type of editing that Eisenstein saw as the essence of cinema.<sup>2</sup> Instead, classic Hollywood exhibits a preponderance of the "invisible style,"<sup>3</sup> which favors story

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<sup>1</sup> When David Bordwell suggests that *causality* is the dominate characteristic of classic Hollywood this means that films of this era demonstrated a paramount concern for telling narratives with clear, and even complex, cause-and-effect structure. This does not just mean at the level of story, that one scene flows logically from previous events, but also at the visual component level, that every shot is the logical predecessor of the shot before. In such a structure, *artifice*, or intrusive technique, must be subservient to plot. This is what led to the phrase "invisible style." In other words, the audience is meant to have lost themselves in the story and not be constantly or even occasionally reminded that they are watching a technological construct. For an in-depth description of the classic style, see the Introduction p. 28, especially n. 31, and pp. 30-31.

<sup>2</sup> See Introduction p. 9 especially n. 13 and p. 29.

<sup>3</sup> Even Gaudreault and Jost, who espouse that enunciation in film demonstrates "the presence of something beyond diegesis, a 'grand image-maker'" (48), also admit that "throughout its history, the cinema has created procedures for concealing" it (49).

over artifice, mise-en-scene over montage, producer over director, and the “genius of the system” over the auteur.

Since classic Hollywood sought cause-and-effect narratives, the *realism* of the British novel was better suited for film adaptation than the “novel-length” works of Hawthorne or Melville. Referring to the works of Hawthorne and Melville as *romances*, as opposed to *novels*, heightens this distinction. The romance, as a general rule, utilizes reflection and emotion to a greater extent than the British novel of action and manners. This explains the cinema’s preference for the latter, since “film cannot effectively reflect the interior process and thoughts of the mind” (Harrington 120). Yet the Bronte sisters achieved an effective blending of emotional reflection and narrative. They created “novels” that can also be categorized as “Dark Romanticism.” Obviously, the connection between the novel and the romance requires resistance to an “all-or-nothing” approach of defining terms.

Similarly, the “invisible style” of classic Hollywood is not a pure characteristic, but a blending of styles. The type of editing that classic Hollywood most often employed had to serve the narrative and embrace continuity—show a wide shot (WIDE) of the character reaching for the door, then cut to a close-up (CU) of a hand grasping the door knob. This type of construction offers little opportunity for directorial intrusion into the narrative. It requires two shots that are easily identifiable as being harmonious with one another, not the “clashing of images,” which Eisenstein advocated. However, even in the epitome of the studio era, *Casablanca* (1942), there is a scene that demonstrates a more discordant juxtaposing of shots. It begins with a shot of Laszlo (Paul Henreid) telling the band to drown out the Nazis by playing “La Marseillaise.” The next shot is of the band. They do not obey him, and, instead, they look off in another direction.



The film then cuts to a shot of Rick (Humphrey Bogart); he nods. Then there is a cut back to the band and they begin to play. This is not quite the “clashing” of shots that Eisenstein urged, but it is far beyond the simple cutting on motion between points of harmonious action. Not only do these seemingly dissonant shots narrate an overt action, they also tell the unseen—that Rick not Laszlo is the hero of this moment. An even more flagrant weaving of realism and formalism is Orson Welles’ *Citizen Kane* (1941), since devotees of both theoretical schools lay claim to this film. The staging-in-depth shots are examples of realism, while the many instances of intrusive editing techniques clearly demonstrate cinematic manipulation, as does the jigsaw-puzzle construction of the narrative itself.

In this sense, Hollywood, despite embracing the stories of British literature over American literature, nonetheless negotiated a stylistic marriage of Romanticism and Realism. Clearly, classic Hollywood, as with almost any categorization or definition, does not exist in an unadulterated state. Indeed, classic Hollywood, as a time that defined the very language of film, also required variation.<sup>4</sup> In evolutionary terms, trial and error was necessary. Some changes would survive, and become a part of what defines cinema, and others would fall away. This combination of attributes begins to explain how transatlanticism could and did coexist with the birth of a national voice in American literature.

Romance is itself a blending, a negotiation between fantasy and realism,<sup>5</sup> and thus illustrates a fundamental parallel between early American literature and classic Hollywood

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<sup>4</sup> Kristin Thompson makes just this point when she opines that the seemingly rigid structure of classic film also allowed for, and even encouraged, variation from the norms. See Introduction p. 29, n. 33.

<sup>5</sup> Irving believed the romance to be “the connecting link between fact and fiction; between the history and the fairy tale” (*Sketch-Book* 151).

cinema. Hybridization, be it between artistic eras or formats, or even within an art form at the level of genre, elucidates artists and works which defy categorization. The engine of such blending is mutating techniques. New techniques were required if the romance was to be more than just sentimentalism and if American identity was to separate from both its British and Puritan heritage. Likewise, cinema would need a “language” of its own in order to become more than just a recorded version of theater, and this too would require new tools. The American Romance of Hawthorne and Melville is not a completely new genre, but the execution of it, the expansion of it, the adaption of it, was new—as was classic Hollywood.

This chapter explores the hybridization of Romanticism and Realism, which developed in both EAL and Classic Hollywood, through close examination of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s 1850 romance, *The Scarlet Letter*, and two screen adaptations, a 1926 big-budget silent version and a 1934 low-budget version. The result is an undeniable kinship between early American literature and classic Hollywood based on numerous commonalities, such as their divergence from and their adherence to “classic” standards, and a straying from the realistic empiricism of their art form. The key to understanding this connection is the concept of hybridization—both in the sense that early American literature is a blending of the romance and the novel and that classic Hollywood mixes both a standardization of cinematic language with more formalistic innovations. Moreover, EAL and classic Hollywood shared a common purpose—that of creating a unique American identity through development of a unique, albeit hybridized, art form.

### **Categorization and Hybridization**

Many early sound films are in fact transition pieces. Late silent films had immensely expanded the language of cinema. The arrival of sound temporarily retarded some of this

cinematic grammar solely due to technical constraints. However, as sound production improved, some of the more “artistic” cinematic techniques, such as staging in depth and complex camera moves, returned, while others, residue from primitive filmmaking, such as minimal editing, and flat stage-like composition, and title cards, would slowly fade in usage. This meant that a Hollywood film by the end of the thirties looked much different than one from the beginning of the decade. However, attributing “primitive” techniques solely to a milieu of transition is difficult because of low budget productions, in which such simplistic characteristics are strictly due to financial constraints.

Early American literature from 1760 to 1860 is likewise a transition period, one in which American writers had to navigate between imitating a British literary style and a more unique national voice. While monetary considerations have less impact on a writer than a filmmaker, the authors of Matthiessen’s *renaissance*, those who consciously sought to create a distinct American literature, definitely had to swim against the popularity of fiction from England.

Transition periods facilitate the mutating of classifications, creating hybridization, which generates definitional contradictions and blending of attributes. Hans Robert Jauss asserts that art forms have three phases. The first is the developmental stage, in which the form evolves its parameters. In the second phase, the “classic” period, the form ripens into full maturity and generates works widely seen as achieving perfection. In the last period, experimentation challenges the standards of the form. If we use Jauss’ terminology, F. O. Matthiessen’s *renaissance* seems *classical*, but the writers of Matthiessen’s *renaissance* also engaged in great experimentation. Similarly, classic Hollywood’s combination of strict adherence to an artistic language with allowances for deviation means that classic Hollywood is both stage two and stage

three simultaneously. These contradictions are only possible if Jauss' stages allow for hybridization. This even applies to extremely distinct categories such as Classicalism and Romanticism. "Both Romanticism and Classicalism are . . . idealist theories of art; they are really opposed not so much by each other as by naturalism" (Williams 39). A similar sentiment proffers:

It is Neoclassicism that initiates the rejection of previous values, the intellectual and artistic aggression that for one and a half centuries has been attributed to Romanticism . . . which permits a redefined Neoclassicism to go on co-existing with Romanticism. (Butler 6)

Hybridization also applies to genres, and as such, further means that genres not only mutate but that they do so almost immediately upon their establishment. The ever-changing nature of genre, just like the ever-changing language of film, means that new norms are born by the blending of old ones. "By inversion, by displacement, by combination . . . it [genre] is a system in continual transformation" (Todorov 161). Furthermore, Ralph Cohen, in paraphrasing Jacques Derrida, asserts, "No sooner is a genre stipulated, then it proceeds to be ungenerated" (206). It is also evidenced by Hawthorne's opinion that his artifice, once exploited, became almost useless. "When the artist rose high enough to achieve the Beautiful, the symbol by which he made it perceptible to mortal senses became of little value in his eyes" (10:475).<sup>6</sup>

Hybridization is essential to understanding Hawthorne's relationship to genre. Jauss encapsulates the concept of genre mutation when he describes *genre* as a process of "continual founding and altering of horizons" (88). This begins to explain how both American film and American Romance are simultaneously derivative and unique, and how the setting up of a

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<sup>6</sup> "The Artist of the Beautiful" (1844) in *Mosses from an Old Manse* (1846).

national literature is connected to the American Romance despite its outward similarity to the British novel.

### **The Romance, the Novel and Hawthorne**

Realism is an essential attribute of the nineteenth century British novel and many have seen that characteristic as the ultimate path to uncovering “truth.” Ian Watt calls the novel, “the sum of literary techniques whereby the . . . imitation of human life follows the procedures adopted by philosophical realism in its attempt to ascertain and report the truth” (31). In addition to Watt, many others saw the novel as the best format for unearthing truth.<sup>7</sup> The British novel arose at a time when a more secular and economic way of viewing life was ascending (Watt 83). As evidenced by the writing of Defoe and Swift, the expansion of journalism in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries greatly influenced the style of the novel. Indeed, the “everyday language” of prose, the language of the essay and journalism, and the novel, laid claim to greater realism than the elevated language of verse.

However, Romanticism and the romance would seek a much different truth than that which mimesis could represent. Advocates of the romance believed that “the imagination often discovers truths where complications of fact obscure it” (Spiller et al. xix). The romance is not concerned with “what is probable. It grasps at the possible” (Simms vi). Similarly, Sir Walter Scott describes the romance as presenting “marvelous and uncommon incidents” (6:155), while

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<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Culler states that, “more than any other literary form, more perhaps than any other type of writing, the novel serves as the model by which society conceives of itself, the discourse in and through which it articulates the world . . . the relations between the individual and society, and, perhaps most important, of the kind of significance which these aspects of the world can bear” (189). However, Hawthorne and Melville saw these as attributes of the romance.

the novel contains “the ordinary train of human events” (6:156). While Scott represents a British view of the romance, the genre would soon take a Yankee turn.

The genre of romance, French and medieval in origin, would soon appeal to American writers as well. Daniel Hoffman says of American fiction that “our romance writers have all taken the role of the artist to be discoverer and revealer of truth” (353). In the preface to *The House of the Seven Gables*, Hawthorne, theorist and practitioner of the romance, compared the two genres by saying, that “the latter form of composition [novel] is presumed to aim at a very minute fidelity . . . The former [romance] . . . has fairly a right to present that truth under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer’s own choosing or creation” (2:1). The romance, or at least a new rendition of it, would soon become a vehicle for a uniquely American voice. Many would see the distinction in very simple terms; “most of the great American novels are romances, most of the English novels are not” (Chase, *American Novel* xii). Elmer Kennedy-Andrews even proclaims that *The Scarlet Letter* “was America’s declaration of cultural independence, the proof of an emergent, distinctively American literary tradition” (5).

Yet even the two titanic and contending literary forces of Realism and Romanticism, did not exist unadulterated. The great British Romantic poets, while exalting the sublimity of nature, sought a style of verse that more mimicked everyday speech than did the elevated tones of classical verse. In a similar hybridization of genre, the novels of sentiment, as well as the gothic novel, stressed depiction of emotion rather than a capturing of reality. Likewise, the realistic British novel, was not unaffected by Romanticism. Dickens, for example, is clearly a mixture of realism and sentimentality. Furthermore, even though the novel observed societal structure, and

often advocated reform of it, while the British Romantics rejected the efficacy of societal change, they both shared one strong commonality—a pronounced emphasis on the individual.

An interest in individualism does not alone explain Hawthorne's attraction to the romance or his insistence that his works be termed romances. Hawthorne believed that the romance contained "strange, delightful recesses" (21:223),<sup>8</sup> which, in his view, opened up increased possibilities for the author.<sup>9</sup> As he states in his preface to *The House of the Seven Gables*:

When a writer calls his work a Romance, it need hardly be observed that he wishes to claim a certain latitude, both as to its fashion and material, which he would not have felt himself entitled to assume, had he professed to be writing a Novel. (2:1)

Moreover, according to Joel Porte, Hawthorne saw that "the question of the romance versus the novel . . . illuminates a moral question: the meaning and value of the inner life" (97). Hawthorne expresses the conviction, that romance actually contains a greater insight into reality than the mimetic novel, when Hawthorne describes a character as living "a more real life within his thoughts" (1:23)<sup>10</sup> or as Henry James, in 1876, would put it, the "real" is those "things we cannot possibly *not* know" (2:xvi).

The concept of blending even exists within the genre of romance itself. In "The Custom-House," the preface to *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne describes the romance as "a neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary

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<sup>8</sup> *The English Notebooks* (1870).

<sup>9</sup> Yvor Winters confirms this assessment of Romance when he describes the structure of *The Scarlet Letter* as the "formula of alternative possibilities" (170).

<sup>10</sup> In "The Christmas Banquet" (1844) in *Mosses from a Old Manse* (1846), Hawthorne described the romance as "the deep, warm secret—the life within the life—which, whether manifested in joy or sorrow, is what gives substance to a world of shadows" (10:301).

may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other” (1:36). Ralph Waldo Emerson first invoked this approach to “reality,” which sought out those liminal spaces between the seen and the unseen, in his proposition that “every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact” (*Centenary* 1:26).<sup>11</sup> It would likewise become the cornerstone for Washington Irving’s<sup>12</sup> affinity for romance and is in complete accord with Hawthorne’s description of the genre as a “foothold between fiction and reality . . . essentially a day-dream and yet a fact” (3:2).<sup>13</sup>

Despite Hawthorne’s instance that he wrote romances, his works are not romance in any traditional sense, but rather a unique blend of previous genres. After all, *The Scarlet Letter* bears little resemblance to Mallory’s *Le Morte de Arthur*, or for that matter to even Irving and Cooper. Moreover, there has even been much debate as to whether or not his work should be identified as romance at all. The “romance theory,” i.e. that Hawthorne and Melville were romancers and not novelists, was so well argued by Lionel Trilling, Richard Chase, and Joel Porte, that for the longest time it was an unchallenged assertion. Their arguments<sup>14</sup> are best summarized by Porte’s contention:

The rise and growth of fiction in this country is dominated by our authors’ conscious adherence to a tradition of non-realistic romance sharply at variance with the broadly novelistic mainstream of English writing . . . a tradition . . . of stylized art—heavily dependent on the use of conventional, or archetypal, figures and on symbol, parable, dream, and fantasy—in order to explore large questions. (Porte ix-x)

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<sup>11</sup> Hawthorne echoed Emerson’s sentiment when he professed that “everything, you know, has its spiritual meaning, which to the literal meaning is what the soul is to the body” (13:95).

<sup>12</sup> See Chapter Two.

<sup>13</sup> *The Blithedale Romance* (1852).

<sup>14</sup> See Trilling “Manners, Morals and the Novel” (1950) especially pp. 201-206; Chase *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (1957) especially pp. ix-xii and 13; and Porte *The Romance in America* (1969) especially pp. 95-97.



Trilling, Chase, and Porte saw American Romance as creating a self-conscious work in which theme and form are equally important.

However, David Hirsch, Nicolaus Mills and others<sup>15</sup> contested this long-accepted premise. Hirsch believed that the romance theory denied “the possibility that appearance and reality may coincide, [and] seems to be depriving appearances of any claim to existence” (33). In addition, both Robert Merrill and Nina Baym felt that Hawthorne muddled the terms *fiction* and *romance*.<sup>16</sup> Merrill rejects Hawthorne and Melville’s work as romance because of their emphasis on dramatic action, which he sees as distinctly novelistic (391).

The problem with both of these contentions is that neither side is willing to embrace the concept of hybridization. Indeed, both the pro-romance theory and anti-romance theory should be seen as describing simultaneous attributes. The American Romance seeks a “multiple truth larger than either of the partial truths offered by its alternatives . . . [it is a] collaboration of both the intellect and the passions” (Hoffman 174). It is not so much that Hawthorne’s works are romance in the tradition of Mallory, but that they are not novels either. *The Scarlet Letter* possesses some of the outward appearance of a novel (prose, chapters, factual descriptions of actions), but it is in its content that Hawthorne’s claim to *romance* has its greatest validity. Clearly the American Romance was a new, or at least mutated, genre—one well suited to a new national literature.

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<sup>15</sup> David Hirsch in *Reality and Idea in the Early American Novel*, Nicholas Mills in *American and English Fiction in the Nineteenth Century: An Antigenre Critique* and Robert Merrill in “Another Look at the American Romance” all held that “major American fictions have indeed been misrepresented as romances” (Merrill 379).

<sup>16</sup> Nina Baym, *The Shape of Hawthorne’s Career*. (1976), p. 203.

## Hawthorne, American Romance and Cinema

The Introduction of this work established the congruity between EAL and classic Hollywood in numerous ways, not least of which is that both made a concerted effort to create, define, and promote a sense of the American identity to the rest of the world. Both mediums, in their respective eras, combined existing art forms, with influences from previous periods and foreign cultures, into a unique American invention. This chapter extends that relationship to the level of genre, specifically the American Romance, and even more specifically to Hawthorne. Hawthorne's style "is the skeptical offering of the multiple meanings. . . . The tone of this style is curiously both detached and committed, both amused and serious, both dubious and affirmative" (Hoffman 173). Hoffman's trio of opposites; detached-committed, amused-serious, and dubious-affirmative, not only accurately describes Hawthorne but cinema as well. In fact, Richard Jewell describes the stylistic approach of the studio era as essentially "romantic," in that, the classic Hollywood style "favored stories in which courage, sacrifice, benevolence, justice, freedom, optimism, individualism and, above all else, love [and that] the prevailing style deftly amplified the triumphs of the human spirit" (168).

The uniqueness of the American experience not only made the American Romance stand out from the mimetic British novel but from Old World romances as well. The blending of fact and fancy is a necessary tactic in a culture, like the New World, that has to imagine or invent a past. Lacking the extensive history of England, New World romancers turned to folklore and myth, rather than the British novel of manners, to create "anti-rational formulations of meaning" (Hoffman 3). Moreover, an Old World romancer, such as Sir Walter Scott, had extensive national history and legend to call upon, and Irving and Cooper are often seen as mimicking such

style, but while Scott celebrates the past, Hawthorne clearly does not. In fact, in *The House of the Seven Gables*, he says of history that “it lies upon the Present like a giant’s dead body” (2:182). Indeed, Hoffman believes that the “tensions between their New and Old World heritages” created in American Romance, “common commitments to themes implicit in our national experience” (355).

Despite similarities to other forms, many have seen the romance as an ideal conveyance of the characteristics of the American identity. Perry Miller states unambiguously, “The philosophical doctrine of the romance . . . [is] that form in which Young America sought to prove their Americanism” (*Raven* 339). Likewise, Michael Davitt Bell states that “there is a fundamental affinity between the idea of ‘romance’ and the idea of a distinctive ‘America’” (161). Hoffman asserts that “romances reflect the isolation of the individual” (354), which is certainly the conflict for Hawthorne’s characters. Whereas characters from Austen or Dickens may struggle against the constraints of society, they are not isolated from their community. They are, in fact, embroiled in it. Conversely, the hero/heroine of the American Romance needs “to discover or redefine his old identity” (Hoffman 354)—a characteristic completely appropriate to a nation trying to establish a distinct cultural identity. “The individual discovery of his own identity in a world where his essential self is inviolate and independent of . . . involvements in history” (Hoffman x), explains not only American literature’s claim on the romance, but also its move from regional to national to universal application.<sup>17</sup> Richard Gravil sees the march to cultural independence as the selection of the Romantic over the Victorian. “To be a Romantic in America in the 1830s and 1840s and 1850s was one way of avoiding Augustan gentilities,

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<sup>17</sup> William Channing saw the eventual result of American literature was “to spread far and wide the light which springs up in meditative, profound, and sublime understandings” (248).

without falling into Victorian ones” (xvi). Gravit also describes American Romanticism as “redeemed from the tentativeness, the doubt, the indirections, the failures and the compromises, of their English precursors, or to fulfill in America what was only promised in England” (xvii). The singularity of the American experience was to generate a similarly unique literature. In addition to creating and promoting a national identity, American Romance and classic Hollywood are both hybrids which harbor parallels in terms of theme and technique.

First, both classical film and romance, at least traditional romance, have a strong tendency toward subject matter that transcends the ordinary. Like their predecessors’ absorption with Arthurian myth, both Scott and Cooper focus on heroic exploits with a legendary ambiance. Even Melville’s opus concerns a herculean, if misguided, adventure. Similarly, Jewell asserts that the “romantic mythology” of classic Hollywood embraced a “larger than life” subject matter, presented characters who were “noble and important,” and exhibited a preference for content that “magnified the idealistic” (169). Like written romance, classic Hollywood was obsessed with stories of kings, queens and great warriors. The biopic, as discussed in Chapter Three, dealt with the lives of famous people. Show biz, specifically Broadway, was common source material. Ordinary people were often only examined in comparison with the wealthy. Everyday life was embellished with musical numbers. So prevalent was the preference for larger-than-life material that the 1955 film *Marty*, the simple story of a lonely Bronx butcher, would seem, at the time, revolutionary.

Secondly, film and romance, and specifically Hawthorne, blend the real with the “marvellous.” Romance, like “movies are dreamlike and fantastic” (P. Tyler xxvi). Cinema’s “principle function is to create special ‘worlds’. . . but despite . . . [a] veneer of authenticity . . .

the quest for order . . . [is] not hampered by any significant temporal restrictions” (Jewell 152-53). In addition, Christian Metz believes that “the power of unreality in film derives from the fact that the unreal seems to have been realized” (*Film* 5). The blending of fact and fantasy also explains why romance and film are less interested in duplicating reality than with creating their own sense of reality—their own verisimilitude. Jean Mitry claims that, with cinema, “what matters . . . is not the *represented* reality but the *signified* reality, not what is revealed or narrated but what is *expressed*” (Mitry 87). In other words, film, like the American Romance, “must constantly transcend its own mirror nature of literal reflection” (P. Tyler xxiv). In so doing, both are “interpreting reality rather than presenting a reality already interpreted” (Mitry 355). Similarly, Andre Bazin sees the cinematic style as “essentially a form of self-effacement before reality” (1:29). These observations explain the self-aware nature of “artifice,” and the role of such conscious constructs in both classic Hollywood and American Romance.

The film-romance connection requires an examination of technique. Porte describes the American Romance as being just as concerned with form as with theme. This conscious construction is what John Stubbs called Hawthorne’s preoccupation with artifice—those techniques that are deliberately intrusive. Matthiessen states that the American Romance bears the “marks of abstraction” (243), a technique that strips the narrative of mimetic details, imbuing it instead with symbolism, and creating distance from the characters. Stubbs saw this distancing as a self-conscious probing by Hawthorne, which would increase the range of possibilities and insight (82).<sup>18</sup> Hawthorne borrows conventions of the romance and manipulates them to create

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<sup>18</sup> As Kennedy-Andrews says of “The Custom-House,” the “narrator/author stresses the merits of authorial reserve, indirectness, even masking” (9). Hawthorne himself described this surreptitious attribute when he says, “keep the inmost Me behind the veil” (1:4). Film historian Tag Gallagher also uses the concept of pushing back the veil when describing, in a DVD extra, film director Josef von

meaning that can only be derived from a “world set at a distance from ordinary experience . . . through artifice” (Stubbs xiv). “A world set at a distance” not only describes romance, it also describes America itself, thus underlining the role of romance in American identity. It is also a perfect description of cinema. The screen presents us a world, but also divides us from it. No matter how much the audience may identify with a screen character, there is always a great chasm between the two “realities.”

Likewise, the language of cinema is inextricably linked with the development of technique, or artifice. The artifice of romance, as previously stated, was the technique of distance, a tool which intended to make the human experience more comprehensible. Conversely, throughout its classical evolution, cinema increasingly sought to bridge the gap between viewer and screen text. However, if montage is the essence of cinema, as even Bazin admits, then it is certainly a self-conscious and palpable construct—one which makes the filmmaking process manifest. Whether as obtrusive as Eisenstein advocated or as supposedly “invisible” as the classic Hollywood style professed, “the world reveals . . . only because the filmmaker has asked it to” (Mitry 172). Arthur Knight believes that the developing language of film employed the camera to reduce the real world to something that only resembled the real world (31). Knight further points out that it is technique, specifically the artifice of editing, which accomplishes this verisimilitude. While Knight sees new technological developments as always serving “the endless pursuit of reality” (2), he also believes that cinema artists always seek “the reality that lay behind the surface” (2), which describes the American romancers quite

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Sternberg’s attempts to reveal inner character on screen. This is the artifice of abstraction, a de-emphasis on the merely representational qualities of art, and it is the technique of both the romancer and the filmmaker.

aply. Thus both Hawthorne's Romance and classic Hollywood cinema use technique, or artifice, to find a deeper kind of truth than Realism reveals. This relationship, and the hybridizations that validate it, are well demonstrated by a comparison of Hawthorne's 1850 text and its 1926 and 1934 film adaptations.

***The Scarlet Letter* (1926)(1934)**

The 1926 version of *The Scarlet Letter* epitomizes a high-budget production of the late silent era in Hollywood. Directed by Victor Sjöström,<sup>19</sup> this MGM film was the creation of a studio that was not shy about lavish productions and, indeed, casted the queen of the silent screen, Lillian Gish, as Hester Prynne. The film's vivid costumes and elaborate and detailed sets (especially compared to its 1934 counterpart) also attest to MGM's commitment to high end production values. In addition, the complexity of the film's camera movements reminds us, as stated earlier, that very early sound was often a step backward in the camera's freedom.

This 1926 adaptation of Hawthorne's text also exemplifies both the established and developing cinematic language of the time. By this time, the grammar of cinema required that the first shot of a scene, and certainly at the beginning of the film, open with an establishing WIDE of the location, prior to moving in, or more likely, cutting to tighter components of the WIDE. This ordered breakdown of the "theatrical" scene was a standard set by D. W. Griffith. However, silent film could also employ title cards to establish location. Usually, these techniques would be redundant, but the 1926 version of *The Scarlet Letter* uses the title card, "Puritan Boston on a Sabbath day in July," to replace an establishing WIDE. The first shot after

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<sup>19</sup> Sjöström was a Swedish-born filmmaker who immigrated to the United States at age forty-five. Although not as famous as von Stroheim and von Sternberg, Sjöström is yet another example of the transnational influences exerted upon classic Hollywood.

the title card is a CU of a rose bush. This first shot duplicates Hawthorne's opening imagery, which also begins with an emphasis of the component elements of a situation. The use of a title card to establish location frees the film up to open with a more synecdochic component.

The classic Hollywood need for a WIDE of the location cannot, however, be completely avoided, but this film uses rather complex camera movement to achieve it. From the shot of the rose bush, the camera tilts up to a prison window made of iron and wood. Someone is peering out through the bars. The next shot is a medium shot (MED)<sup>20</sup> of a bell tower; the bells are ringing. The shot tilts down from the bells to public stocks, which stand atop a scaffold in the town square. Tilting further down, we see that under the scaffold is a roughly constructed wooden enclosure, not high enough to stand up in. A man sits in it. Around his neck is a sign, "drunk." Then the shot pans/dollies from the jail to the town square, ending in a WIDE of the village with the inhabitants congregating toward the church. This demonstrates not only the visual creativity of the late silent era, and the high level of MGM's technical expertise, but also a willingness to stretch the tradition of the establishing WIDE by building to it.

Following a repeat shot of the ringing bell, another camera move takes place amid the people who are heading to church. This camera movement demonstrates how film can convey multiple meaning in a single image. This a straight-on shot of a group of eight Puritan children, who fill the screen, walking toward the camera and the camera dollying backward to smoothly move with them. The fact that a camera moves with characters prompts the audience to identify with the subjects. However, the stern, joyless expressions of the children's faces, actually pushes

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<sup>20</sup> The term medium shot is incredibly relative. A given shot is a medium only in relation to a wider or tighter shot.



the audience away. It would take a while for early sound film to return to camera movements this visually complex.

While these techniques show the cutting-edge nature of filmmaking at the time, this opening sequence also contains elements which demonstrate the yet embryonic nature of film language. Amid these opening camera moves, the film also employs a dissolve. As the grammar of the cinema would solidify, the dissolve would come to signal a change in time and/or place. Neither of which occur in this opening sequence. Very often, in filmmaking of this period, the dissolve and the cut seem almost interchangeable.

Just as camera moves that parallel actors' movement can create ambiguity, so too does the first interior shot (INT) in this film remind us that multiple perspectives are much easier to achieve in film than literature. The next shot is an INT. WIDE of the church, followed by a CU of the minister. The film chooses to introduce Dimmesdale before Hester. In Hawthorne's text, there is little question that this is Hester's story and her perspective. Our initial identification in this film version is Dimmesdale, even though later in the film Hester's perspective will become dominant. The 1934 version also demonstrates the ways in which film presents, often without even trying, multiple perspectives.

Despite the advanced style of camera movement in this film, as a silent film, it also contains an extensive use of title cards, a technique nearly extinct by the end of the thirties. Within the church, after the CU of Dimmesdale, there is an intertitle: "Rev. Dimmesdale, beloved of the people." Silent films need to use text to identify characters, whereas sound film would find more subtle ways, namely dialogue. Actually, many times character identity is revealed through dialogue which is anything but subtle. Often very stilted and expository

dialogue is employed in classic Hollywood. In dialogue scenes of silent movies, intertitles break up shots, and so interfere with the invisible style. Yet, as there is not a title card for every word the actors are obviously speaking, title cards in a silent scene are never employed nearly as often as cuts are in a sound scene. Ironically then, despite often stilted dialogue and the sheer preponderance of cuts as opposed to title cards, the seamless integration of sound would become an essential part of film grammar, which was obviously lacking in this 1926 version.

Nonetheless, this film does attempt to advance visual composition of dialogue scenes through camera placement. Cutaways to CUs during dialogue scenes began to explore camera angles which depart from a strict 180° rule, i.e. from a strict theater audience perspective. CUs, which achieve a more straight-on shot of the actors, rather than their profile, more approximate the view of the other dialogue participant, as illustrated in Figure 1 below. However, wider dialogue shots, i.e. the master shot, all still take place parallel to the plane of action created by the camera, and thus film, at this time, is still locked in many ways to its theatrical ancestor.<sup>21</sup> It can be argued that “distance” from the characters actually mimics one of Hawthorne’s goals, at least as Stubbs described it. However, detachment in Hawthorne’s text is clearly a deliberate artifice, designed to facilitate ambiguity, while audience distance in both the 1926 and 1934 version is merely due to rudimentary film techniques.

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<sup>21</sup> With the noticeable exception, as discuss in the Introduction (p. 38), the films of von Stroheim and von Sternberg.

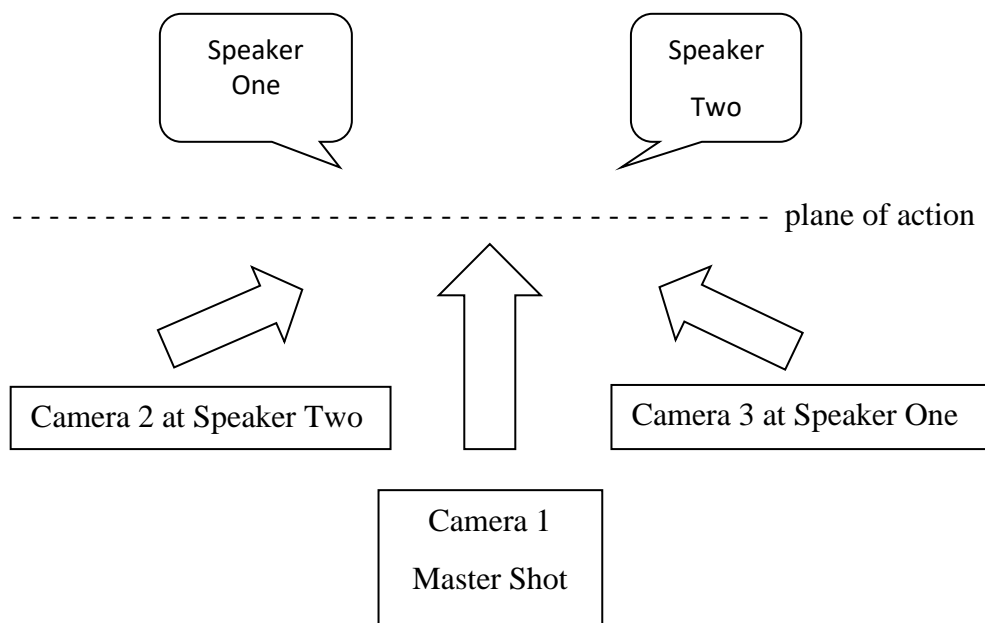


Figure 1. Standard camera angles for classic dialogue scene.

Still attempts at more diverse angles for CUs and intricate camera moves, indicate the way cinema style was evolving. While the vast majority of shots in both versions are flatly staged, Hollywood was clearly attempting to divest itself of this theatrical burden. Although Hawthorne certainly attempted to create “distance” in his work, Hollywood sought to find ways to fill that dead space between the characters and the camera. One such attempt is the shot, through the door of Hester’s cabin, when she first meets her returned husband. However, the use of OTS (over-the-shoulder), to create depth, is scarce in this film, and in other silent films, and even, for that matter, in early sound films.

As opposed to the use of an intertitle, as the film employs with Dimmesdale, a series of shots serve to reveal Hester’s personality. From the church, we cut to Hester in her cottage,

which is identified by a sign outside stating that Hester provides needlework. She is trying on various bonnets. A sampler hangs on the wall which reads “vanity is an evil.” She lifts it; it has been covering a mirror. Hester continues to try on bonnets in front of the mirror; Hester is perhaps not the best Puritan. Next, her bird escapes from its cage and she has to chase it. The disapproving women of the village, on their way to church, sneer at her inappropriate behavior on the Sabbath.

One of the clear attributes of classic Hollywood, in terms of adapting literature, is the desire to augment the “source” material. In this version, this manifests itself in the presentation of the backstory of Hester and Dimmesdale’s relationship, certainly more than Hawthorne gives. For Hester’s Sabbath “violation,” the authorities, unbeknownst to Dimmesdale, put Hester in the stocks. When Dimmesdale finds Hester, he first gives her water then releases her. This is clearly adaptation augmentation and it unsubtly displays one of David Bordwell’s canonic features<sup>22</sup> of classic Hollywood—the love story. No matter what the source material, Hollywood added or expanded the amorous aspect. In Hawthorne’s text, whatever transpires between Hester and Dimmesdale is almost incidental to their “transgression.” There is the barest of mentions concerning their original relationship in the written text: “What we did had a consecration of its own” (1:195).

Filmic augmentation not only provides greater character depth, but it also injects humor. There is an entire scene where Hester and Dimmesdale walk through the fields. Hester says to him, “It would be pleasant, sir, to walk beside thee and hear thee condemn me for my sin.” While this humor is not a part of Hawthorne’s text, it does strive, as does the book, to create a

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<sup>22</sup> The others, as stated in the Introduction, are narratives based on causality and techniques that mask the filmmaking process.

wily and complex Hester. This scene also involves a dolly move forward that follows the couple as Hester pursues Dimmesdale and then, as he tries to avoid her by turning and walking in the opposite direction, the camera becomes a dolly back. This is yet another example of complex camera movement in the late silent era.

The perspective of Hawthorne's text and the 1926 film become congruent when Hester finally walks from the prison door to the scaffold. We definitely experience the events from Hester's perspective. The camera dollies back as she walks towards the camera, but there is also the reverse shot, dollying forward, showing Hester's POV, with the crowd backing up from her as she advances. Thus perspective is not only achieved by POV shots, but, in fact, it is achieved more acutely by seeing the expression of the person in question. Both camera perspectives, which are actually visual opposites, combine to create a single character perspective.

The connection between American Romance and classic Hollywood is concretized as Hester stands upon the scaffold. The lack of spoken dialogue, which provides silent looks of alternating defiance and repentance and even love for Dimmesdale, as well as Hollywood's desire for long glamour shots of a female star like Lillian Gish, creates a more ambiguous and emotionally deep portrayal of the heroine. This is the Hester of Hawthorne's book; it is American film as romance.

Lastly, the CUs of Hester upon the scaffold further strengthens ties between the written text and this film. In her CUs, Hester appears angelic and glowing. In fact, Hawthorne indirectly describes her as a Madonna, saying that had there been a Papist in the crowd, they would have no doubt seen the parallel (1:56). This is the plausible deniability that a detached literary narrator can achieve, as opposed to film which must show it for us to think it. However,

the actual similarity between these depictions of Hester is undeniable, even though the methods of the descriptions differ.

It is clear that divergences between written text and this film result mainly from both augmentation and deletion. While augmentations such as romantic love and humor dominate the first half of the film, the remainder of the film is marked by abbreviations in the original text. One element from the book, which is missing in this film version, is the ambiguity of the attitude of the town and the question as to whether or not their perception of Hester changes with time. This is key to the question has Hester redeemed herself in society's eyes, and, indeed, in her own.

Most of all, the film's truncated version of what takes place after Hester's admission, also destroys much of the supernatural tenor of Hawthorne's original text. There is no scene at night, when Hester, Dimmesdale and Pearl meet upon the scaffold and a meteor flashes, illuminating the shape of an "A" in the sky (1:155). Without this foretaste of the strange and marvelous, the miraculous "A" burned into Dimmesdale's chest, presumably by guilt, is not properly set up for the audience. It becomes, in this film, just as in the 1934 version, an undeniably real event. Despite other similarities between Romance and film, this is the inescapable realistic aspect of cinema.

In comparison, the 1934 film version of *The Scarlet Letter* stands in the shadow of the 1926 version. This adaptation was produced by Majestic Pictures, one of the Poverty Row studios. It was directed by Robert G. Vignola, and starred Colleen Moore. Its low budget makes it difficult to establish whether this film's "shortcomings" reflect the status of filmmaking in the early sound era or just insufficient financing. In either case, it definitely presents another

example of how classical Hollywood style received extraneous influences from beyond the well-recognized style of the major studios—in this case, from low-budget considerations which may have instigated artistic results. In other words, classical Hollywood, just like early American literature, is a complex construct—melding not only various influences but also creating artifice for various reasons. Whatever the causes, the idea of ever-mutating genres is apparent in the classical Hollywood structure of melding uniformity with variation. The 1934 film version of *The Scarlet Letter* epitomizes this by adhering to the “new” language of cinema, while clearly breaking many of its rules as well. Some aspects of the adherence-variation duality in the 1934 film underscore the connection between the American Romance and classic Hollywood and others appear to undermine it.

One scene in this film, which is particularly problematic for the romance-cinema association, is the final shot upon the scaffold. It represents a fundamental difference between film and romance—the difference between myth and reality. Romance attempts to leave unsettled the question of whether or not a “marvellous” event really happened. In the book, it is a matter of question whether or not Dimmesdale actually has an “A” miraculously inscribed on his chest. The only certitude is, as the narrator relates, that many said it was so. In the 1934 film, however, it is clear that he does. The use of an unreliable narrator, one who hides behind the defense that he is only reporting what others have said,<sup>23</sup> allows for plausible deniability. However, replication of the unreliable narrator is difficult on screen. The camera either shows something or it does not.

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<sup>23</sup> This is not just a characteristic of Hawthorne’s brand of romance. It was a common narrative technique of Irving who would often attribute a story to what the “good Dutch wives” believe, thus relieving the narrator of the culpability for veracity.

Comparing the final shots of the 1926 and the 1934 versions highlights the problem that budgets make in evaluating the two films. The next-to-last shot in the 1926 version is an ECU of Hester, holding the dead Dimmesdale in her arms. We dissolve to the last shot, a WIDE of the square. This is more dramatic than the awkward crane shot in the 1934 version. It relies on the drama of the scene, rather than the intrusion of a camera move. Big-budget Hollywood, as opposed to low-budget Hollywood, may have had better technique, better camera movements, but they also knew when and when not to use them. Low-budget Hollywood often did not.

Distinctions between the two versions are apparent from the very beginning, where their prologues display a different approach to one of Hawthorne's original themes. The prologue of the silent states, "Here is recorded a stark episode in the lives of a stern, unforgiving people, a story of bigotry uncurbed and its train of sorrow, shame and tragedy." This stands in stark contrast to the apologetic prologue of the 1934 version: "Though to us the customs seem grim and the punishments hard, they were a necessity of the times and helped shaped the destiny of a nation."<sup>24</sup> The 1850 text criticizes Puritanism, rather than praising or excusing it.<sup>25</sup> The use of an opening title card to make a thematic comment is not typical in classic Hollywood. In a very strict sense, this prologue is a "disclaimer." An analogous use in classic Hollywood is at the beginning of gangster films, where they were conspicuously designed to avert public criticism. Here, it defends the actions of a bygone era because of the essential role that era played in forming the American identity, as if to deflect criticism for depicting such a cruel society.

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<sup>24</sup> This prologue vindicates Sacvan Bercovitch's estimation of the role that Puritan heritage played in the creation of national identity.

<sup>25</sup> Clearly the 1926 version is more in harmony with Hawthorne than the 1934. This could be attributed to classic Hollywood's tendency to create and endorse a more favorable image of the American identity.



However, in Hawthorne's text, American identity is a characteristic of dubious quality—portraying both the light and the dark of the early American experience. Not so in classic Hollywood, where the American identity is an unequivocal “good,” and so, as the film's prologue suggests, any darker periods of that heritage were necessary rites of passage.

After the prologue, the opening sequence of the 1934 film, like the 1926 version, deals with the issue of punishment, both demonstrating the pervasiveness of punishment in this stern society. Unlike the written text, neither film begins with Hester's punishment. We have already described the opening shots of the jail and the stocks in the 1926 version, but the 1934 version goes even further beyond Hawthorne. It introduces the punishment of the cleft stick for malicious gossip. This punishment consists of a wooden device that clamps onto the tongue of the offender, who must then wear it in public for some determined time. The first shot is of a legal document describing the punishment.<sup>26</sup> The second shot is a MED of the “clefted” woman. While strictly speaking, the film and the text open with different visual depictions of punishment, the thematic emphasis on retribution and its centrality to Puritanism is the same. The thematic difference, however, is that the written text forefronts an individual perspective to atonement—Hester's experience alone, whereas the film projects the prevalence of stringent “justice” in this early colonial society. In other words, the film visually suggests that punishment is everywhere in Puritan society, while the book, though not denying this, presents a much more singular focus of the subject.

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<sup>26</sup> It is not typical, of the Hollywood style, to open with a written diegetic document. Classical style often starts with opening text, taking the place of a narrator, but it is usually expository and non-diegetic. One specific use of on-screen text, which classical Hollywood often employed, was to open literary adaptations with the first page of the original text. This not only sets the mood, but also provides legitimacy and credibility for the film. However, this 1934 film adaptation displays little evidence that the producers sought to profit from Hawthorne's ethos.

The issue of perspective, discussed earlier in terms of the 1926 film, reveals another disconnect between the 1934 film and Hawthorne's text. In this case, it is indicative of a wider problem inherent in film adaptation—that of depicting a character's inner thoughts. In the book, Hester can never decide if her daughter Pearl is a blessing or a curse. She often sees Pearl as an ethereal creature who is beyond comprehension. This is a perceptual dilemma which the film cannot recreate. Hester's ambiguity toward her daughter mirrors the book's view of guilt as an allusive concept. Hester's subconscious, or indeed any character's, is not easily depicted cinematically. This is not just a problem in classic Hollywood; it is one of those aspects of adaptation that suggests incompatibility between these mediums. To expose a character's reflections on the screen often requires stilted dialogue, or, in the case of 1940s film noir, the use of first-person narration. Neither technique is particularly cinematic, especially by the definition of "show, don't tell."<sup>27</sup>

Another distinction between all written texts and film in general is the very nature of narrative perspective, which, as displayed in the 1926 version, is more concrete in film than in literature. In the 1850 text, despite the use of a third-person narrator, Hester is the predominant viewpoint—the story is "felt" from her perspective. In the 1934 film, however, prior to the arrival of Hester, there is no single perspective; the camera truly is an omnipresent and omniscient narrator. With cinema, the connection of the story to a single viewpoint is not nearly as restricted as in written fiction.<sup>28</sup> In this film, before the heroine first appears, a serving woman

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<sup>27</sup> Gaudreault and Jost refer to cinema as "that regime of showing (monstration)," in which, "the discursive instance is less apparent than in a written tale. Events seem to tell their own stories" (45).

<sup>28</sup> Despite the presence of the authorial voice, most narrative elements are still revealed as they are perceived by a character, and usually by the main character. Furthermore, the narrator/character

at a tavern relates the story of Hester's crime to a stranger who has just arrived in town. Although not immediately revealed, the stranger is in fact Hester's long-lost husband, and assumes the alias of Chillingworth. The perspective during this tavern scene is nebulous. It could be through the eyes of the stranger or the woman telling Hester's story. It is certainly not Hester's perspective; she has not even appeared in the narrative at this point. Likewise, when Hester is on the scaffold and Dimmesdale pleads with her to identify her co-sinner, the scene could be Hester's perspective or Dimmesdale's. Written fiction often creates sympathy for multiple characters, but usually empathy for only one—the distinction is much less clear with cinema.<sup>29</sup>

Cinematic techniques, like parallel editing, further heighten perspective confusion. While the written text can only be in one place at one time, the camera creates the illusion of being everywhere. If a movie cuts back and forth between a bank robbery and the police on the way to the robbery—the epitome of parallel editing—these shots cannot possibly be the same perspective. Perspective in cinema is much more fluid than in written fiction. Although it is often thought that the reader of a novel creates images and the film audience is fed images, in a

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companionship is often fixed throughout the book. A noticeable exception is those chapters of *Moby Dick* where Melville abandons Ishmael's voice and provides "episodes" from a more dispassionate view.

<sup>29</sup> Gaudreault and Jost believe that "The multiplicity of modes of expression [in film] provokes, or permits a variety of 'narrative situations' that go far beyond those available in written literature" (57). In other words, film generates the impression of "someone watching the scene, a person located in the diegesis," (49) which creates character perspective. The biggest distinction, for Gaudreault and Jost, between written narration and film narration is that, "due to the homogeneous nature of written narrative . . . compared to the essentially polyphonic character of filmic narrative," various combinations of filmic narrative levels are made possible, which are "much more complex than in literature" (54). The result is that "cinema has an almost natural predilection for narrative delegation, for embedded discourses" (52). In other words, film "is always a double narrative" (53), or often more than just double. The issue of camera as narrator is also addressed in the Introduction, p. 27 including n. 28.

way, it is the filmgoer who creates. Perspective is provided to the reader, whereas the filmgoer creates, or at least has the illusion of creating, perspective.

The issue of perspective, however, can also illustrate parallels between the written text and the 1934 screen adaptation, even though the actual technique must differ due to the fundamentals of the medium. When Chillingworth hears Hester's story, he reacts sharply. His agitation is clear even though the reason for it is as yet unrevealed. Like the omniscient narrator in fiction, the camera makes privy otherwise undisclosed insight, even if the complete nature of that insight is not always fully comprehensible. This is elementary to a modern filmgoer, but that is precisely the point; it is elementary because this period established such aspects as cinematic language. Similarly, the written text introduces the husband in Chapter One, but, despite several clues in the character's behavior and description, does not reveal the exact relationship between Hester and Chillingworth until much later. In both instances, the comparison between narrator and camera signifies that the language of film and the language of literature have distinct points of tangency.

The comparison between perspective in film and text also demonstrates, as mentioned before, another distinction between the mediums—augmentation. The entrance of Hester from behind the prison door occurs almost immediately in the written text. In the film, Hester's emergence takes place at the eight-minute mark. Everything prior to this moment is pure augmentation. This demonstrates Hollywood's approach to adaptation; conversion to film not only omits, as viewers of screen adaptation often protest—"They cut the best part"—but augments source material as much, if not more, than it deletes. Source material for Hollywood, despite any pretense of textual fidelity, has always been extremely malleable.

Like the 1926 version, the 1934 version also indulges in the classic Hollywood augmentation of injecting humor into a text where it did not originally exist. To accomplish the injection of humor, film often requires the addition of extraneous characters. One such scene, in the 1934 version of *The Scarlet Letter*, concerns a “courting trumpet.” In this scene, a woman, who, according to Puritan restrictions, can only be courted by her suitor through a trumpet, ends up engaged to the wrong suitor. This scene lasts for six minutes—quite a digression from a narrative with a total running time of only one hour and thirteen minutes. Few consider humor a characteristic of Hawthorne’s original text, but an enduring attribute of classic Hollywood is the compulsion to inject and even replace narrative tone.

The insertion of humor, however, is not always in disaccord with the theme of the original text as one particular scene in this film attests. There is one humorous segment in the 1934 film which actually displays philosophical fidelity with Hawthorne. It involves a widow who states that according to Puritan law any man, who sees her undergarments, must marry her. This is certainly a satirical way of criticizing Puritanism. The method—humor—is certainly not in keeping with the style of the 1850 text, but both film and text share a similar view of Puritan society. This scene also demonstrates how what initially seems to be dissimilarity between text and film is actually, in a thematic sense, a similarity. Yet, as stated earlier, a comparison between film and Romance requires not only an examination of thematic elements, but technical as well.

Despite cinema’s claim to an “invisible style,” the final shot of the 1934 opening sequence exhibits one of classic Hollywood’s more overt techniques, one which parallels Hawthorne’s self-professed reliance on artifice—a long and uneven crane shot. As a rule, edit

points are more intrusive than long shots (long in terms of duration), but their function is to move the viewer from the ECU to the HIGH WIDE, or vice versa, in order to convey a point of emphasis. It is an extremely manipulative technique and another example of how the classic Hollywood style is far from invisible. The sweeping crane shot is the cinematic equivalence of the exclamation point in writing. The final shot of the opening sequence begins as a WIDE of the square and the scaffold, then moves in on the humiliated Hester and finally comes to rest on the ignoble but nonetheless flamboyant “A” upon her chest.<sup>30</sup> Such an elaborate crane shot is a signature of classic Hollywood’s technology and techniques.<sup>31</sup> Certain techniques in this film, such as the iris wipe for scene transitions, were relics of the silent era and Hollywood abandoned them by the close of the first full decade of sound. The crane shot, however, became smoother and more graceful, as demonstrated by the sweeping crane shot in Alfred Hitchcock’s dining room scene from *Rebecca* (1940). Perfecting the smoothness of such a camera movement, however, does not lessen its noticeable intrusion.

Since technique in film is not always a conscious effort, and Hawthorne’s artifice is always a deliberate effort, the comparison between *The Scarlet Letter* of 1850 and *The Scarlet Letter* of 1934 is sometimes strained. The opening sequence of this film contains a technical problem—a “jump cut,” which, whether for artistic or monetary reasons or due simply to embryonic filmmaking, represents a great departure from other films of the day, but also from Hawthorne’s text. A “jump cut” means that the focal length or camera angle of two contiguous

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<sup>30</sup> For Hawthorne’s theme, Hester’s “A” is both a symbol of shame and pride. Such symbolic ambiguity is difficult for cinema in general, and specifically for this 1934 version, to capture.

<sup>31</sup> It is for just such filmmaking capabilities that Hitchcock gave up the freedom and control he had in England to subjugate himself to the power of the American studio system.

shots scarcely changes at all. The rules of continuity allow, actually insist, that two shots be radically different. If the shot changes only slightly, it is actually more startling. Radically different shots have meaning; slightly different shots are perceived as a mistake. This jump cut breaks a basic cinematic rule. The fact that cutting on motion, as a means to smooth out discontinuity and to create “invisibility,” had been an established cinematic maxim for some time, indicates that this jump cut is more likely a result of a hasty shot set up rather than a lack of understanding of the principles of seamless continuity. When technique is consciously explicit in a film, a comparison to Hawthorne’s text is appropriate, but when it is a “mistake” or otherwise unintended, the comparison is weakened.

The technical construction of the 1934 film’s opening sequence is fragmented compared to the classical style and initially subverts any connection between film and literature. In written fiction, the author may juggle narrative elements at the level of chapters, but for writing to make sense, the basic building blocks of sentences have limited sequential variation. This opening montage, however, illustrates that the building blocks of film, shots, have no such constraints on order. Therefore, the creation of time and place on screen is very different than on the page. Furthermore, even though early sound films appear more rigid in shot assemblage than modern motion pictures, this opening demonstrates shot order variation, even within the constrained format of classic Hollywood.

Yet it is precisely variation from filmic convention which reveals more connection than obstacle between the 1850 text and the 1934 film. The film’s opening sequence breaks one very specific fundamental rule of the classical film style. After 15 various CUs and MEDs, the first WIDE of the village appears. Four-and-a-half minutes transpire without the benefit of an

establishing wide shot. The language of film requires that a film begin with an establishing

WIDE, then cut to the details:

Most Hollywood scenes begin with establishing shots, break the space into closer views linked by eyeline-matches and/or shot/reverse shots, and return to more distant views only when character movement or the entry of a new character requires the viewer to be reoriented. Playing an entire scene without an establishing shot is unlikely. (Bordwell 28)

Hawthorne's written text, like the film, moves from the tight to the wide, from the specific to the general, from detail to overview. Both the 1850 text and the film stress the "close-up." This technique of beginning with a CU rather than an establishing WIDE not only violates a tenant of classic Hollywood grammar, it also replicates the written text's opening, which begins with a description of the prison door. The titles of the book's chapters further demonstrate this tendency. The first chapter, "The Prison Door," is followed by a chapter entitled "The Market Place."—CU to WIDE, instead of WIDE to CU.

Despite denying the audience an establishing wide shot, the 1934 film actually adheres to classic film grammar in many ways, such as the use of dialogue to smooth out cuts. This is central to the concept of the "invisible style," the goal of which is seamless continuity between shots, in other words, to hide the "brushstrokes" of filmmaking. In silent films, tactics like cutting on a character's motion achieved this type of continuity, but with the arrival of sound classic Hollywood realized that audio could also perform the function of "band-aid." For example, early in this film, the village bell begins ringing and continues to do so over several random visuals. This sound of the bell supplies cohesion to seemingly unrelated shots. Thus, the marriage of sound and montage, without the benefit of a location WIDE, nonetheless, creates a distinct sense of place.



If artifice is intrusion into the narrative, then visual graphics are decidedly artifice, yet one which this film avoids. Aside from the opening apology for Puritans, there is only one other graphic in this film. The narrative spans five years and the film, unsubtly, conveys this by the graphic “1642” dissolving to “1647.” While many late silent films were already using considerably fewer title cards, *The Scarlet Letter*’s use of only a single intertitle definitely represents a move away from the look of silent movies. To some extent, the lack of dialogue in a silent film excuses the overabundance of title cards. However, many early sound films were slow to abandon the dependence on visual graphics. This would change over the course of the decade, and the 1934 version of *The Scarlet Letter* heralds this change.

One development in the language of film, to which the 1934 film definitely adheres, is the use of the point-of-view (POV) shot. In one scene, Dimmesdale and Chillingworth are looking out the window. The film cuts to a shot of Hester walking down the street. It then cuts back to the two men. Cinematic grammar indicates that the two men see Hester. It is not required that both the “seer” and the “seen” are in the same shot. This is not the violent clash of montage that Eisenstein promoted, but the continuity editing that Bazin saw as the essence of cinema—both, however, are based on the concept that two shots together have meaning that each by themselves do not.

The blending of ostensibly unrelated, and even contradictory, images is essential to both the language of film and the symbolism of romance. Romance contends that the truth of the human heart is not measurable. Hawthorne’s works rely heavily on the clash between symbols and what they seem to represent. In a truly similar manner, cinematic editing attempts to extract meaning from the juxtaposing of otherwise inharmonious elements. Both romance’s symbolism

and cinema's montage are based on the anti-empirical notion that the total is greater than the sum of the parts.

The 1850 text and its 1934 screen adaptation share this commonality of symbolism. The rose in the opening chapter; Hester's daughter Pearl, "who represents both the emblem of her sin and, as grace" (Hoffman 183), and of course the "A" itself, are all examples of the written text's emphasis on objects and highlight their symbolic role in their world. Similarly, Knight observes that in the development of the cinematic language, the CU emphasizes an object's significance and makes it a dynamic part of its world (21). Thus, the 1850 text precipitates the cinematic style of breaking down the whole into its components. The prison door, the rosebush beside the door, and the "A" on Hester's breast—these are "shots." Shots in a film, despite an appearance of realism, are actually symbolic components. As members of montage, shots create greater meaning than they individually exhibit. Whether as flagrant as Eisenstein or as subtle as continuity editing, cinematic montage is, in fact, a form of symbolism.

The result of Hawthorne's contradictory mix of reality and the supernatural (or at least the unexplainable), as well as his symbolism, is often considered to demonstrate ambiguity.<sup>32</sup> While the realism that film seeks mostly precludes ambiguity, the 1934 screen version of *The Scarlet Letter* nonetheless manages this attribute. The respective endings of this film and this book exhibit, albeit for different reasons, a sense of ambiguity or at least incompleteness. The 1934 *Scarlet Letter* ends with Hester and Pearl on the pillory with Dimmesdale, who dies after

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<sup>32</sup> Gaudreault and Jost point out that Gerard Genette stresses that the ambiguity in the novel arises from the conflict between a story and the technique by which it is told. Hawthorne, of course, as well as the pro-romance theorists, argue that the romance not the novel does this. Gaudreault and Jost further insist that the ambiguity created by the contrast of enunciation and story is heightened in cinema by "the subjectivity of the image" (47).

he exposes the “A” on his chest. Bordwell proclaims that closure is an important component of classical Hollywood structure, yet this film’s abrupt finish<sup>33</sup> exudes insufficiency, especially compared to the book. The endings of both the 1926 and 1934 films leave out an essential aspect of the book—the remainder of Hester’s life. Yet the 1926 version attempts a sense of closure. The ambiguity of Hawthorne’s text arises from an authorial voice that never clarifies identity and results in characters that are full of contradictions, and nowhere is this more manifest than in the fact that Hester remains in this community. The end of the book leaves the question, “Is Hester Prynne the less miserable, think you, for the scarlet letter on her breast?” (1:135). This is the epitome of Hawthorne ambiguity. By denying full resolution and creating a feeling of incompleteness, the open-endedness of the 1934 translates into cinematic terms the book’s sense of ambiguity.

The 1926 and 1934 screen versions of *The Scarlet Letter* both exhibit typical and atypical aspects of classic Hollywood. In spite of or because of this, these films and Hawthorne’s original text, despite the inherent and obvious dissimilarities between written texts and film in general, provide a great deal of evidence for the connection between EAL and classic Hollywood. Hawthorne himself gives credence to the parallel between cinema and romance:

The scenery and figures of actual life were perfectly represented, but with that bewitching, yet indescribable difference which always makes a picture, an image or a shadow so much more attractive than the original. (10:45)<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> The abrupt ending could simply be a characteristic of a cheaply-made film, except that other films of this era share this “flaw,” most noticeably, Universal’s early horror classics, *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*. Even the gangster classic *The Public Enemy*, with its eerie and now iconic last shot of the dead Tom Powers (James Cagney) tumbling into the entryway of his mother’s house, although an appropriate completion for the story of the criminal’s rise and fall, is, nonetheless a stunted denouement. The classic style of Hollywood would come to require, if not a happy ending, at least an ending which “ties up all the loose ends.”

<sup>34</sup> “The Birth-Mark” (1843) in *Mosses from a Old Manse* (1846).

Hawthorne is describing romantic literature but his words are equally appropriate for film. Both mediums, in their respective eras, combine a perfecting of style with innovation. However, in order that these comparisons have greater meaning than just a checklist of similarities and dissimilarities, the notion of hybridization is necessary. The blending that exists at the core of transatlanticism, and the idea that Jauss' periods overlap, concretizes the bond between Romance and the cinema. Furthermore, despite their embryonic stage of development, and because of the hybridization of digression and adherence, both American Romance and the early sound era of Hollywood were already carrying those voices that were deviating from their new norms.

## Chapter Two

### **Romanticism and Disillusionment: the ‘Last Sigh of the Moor’ and *Lost Horizon* (1937)**

Is Boabdil, king of the Moors of Spain,  
Who could have died, yet flees.  
To Spaniards now Granada is restored,  
Crescent doth yield to cross,  
By Boabdil, with tears not blood deplored,  
Is his dear city’s loss.  
Upon a rock, Sigh of the Moor, they call,  
Boabdil sat, and cast. (Gautier 339)

The relationship between Washington Irving and Spain displays a curious circularity – a “chronology” that can be entered into at any point. When the last Islamic stronghold fell in 1492 to Ferdinand and Isabella, the dual monarchs of a newly unified Christian Spain, waiting at the gates of the vanquished city of Granada for the victorious rulers was a Genoese sailor who sought to exploit the peace dividend. The financing of Columbus’s voyage led to the discovery, at least from the European perspective, of a whole new world, which would give birth, through revolution, to a new nation, one of the new authors of which would be Irving. This American writer journeyed to Spain to write a biography of Columbus and became enamored with the bygone Moorish culture which had disappeared from the Iberian peninsula in what has come to be called the Reconquista.<sup>1</sup> In Irving’s entire Spanish odyssey, no place captured his imagination

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<sup>1</sup> In 711, Muslim invaders arrived in the Iberian peninsula from North Africa. They defeated a Visigoth kingdom under the rule of Roderic and the invaders made their capital at Toledo. The Reconquista, the reclaiming of Spain from Islam by Christians, was not an event but a process, one which spanned over seven centuries. Beginning almost immediately after the Muslim conquest of the Iberian peninsula, through the creation of independent Christian kingdoms such as Asturias, Navarre, Leon, Aragon and Castile, and ending with the fall of the last Moorish stronghold, Granada, in 1492, this transformation was characterized by both hostility as well as long periods of co-existence between the two faiths.

more than the palace of the Alhambra in Granada. This exotic structure, a testament to a lost civilization, led Irving to write *Tales of the Alhambra*, in which, among many tangential narratives, he relates the fall of this once great city. Here the cycle of causality is clear: the end of Moorish Spain results in imperialist exploration, which results ultimately in the production of a Washington Irving, who attempts to capture the bygone glory of Moorish Spain. The seminal moment in this circular chain of cause-and-effect is the event known poetically as “The Last Sigh of the Moor”—a moment that witnessed the end of one culture and the inauguration of another. Irving, America’s first great romantic, fell in love with the romance and mystery of a vanished epoch.

Irving’s fascination with Moorish Spain is not the only example of such Western admiration. Indeed, Edward Said<sup>2</sup> termed this enthrallment by Westerners for the exotic “otherness” of the East as *Orientalism* and while not all Romanticism is Orientalism, all Orientalism is certainly romantic.<sup>3</sup> In a way, the degree to which Orientalism is not based in reality is irrelevant to romance. In fact, one could argue the less factual, the more the allure to a romantic. Irving’s Orientalism can be more specifically described as *maurophilia*, a term coined by Georges Cirot (and expanded on by Barbara Fuchs)<sup>4</sup> to mean a cultural and literary affinity with “moorishness,” a term that aptly defines Irving.

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<sup>2</sup> Said’s concept of Orientalism suggests that the East is an exotic canvas where Western fears and dreams are projected. In such a view, people of the East only exist to either thwart or facilitate the Westerner’s adventure.

<sup>3</sup> “One of the strangest delusions of the Western mind is to the effect that a philosophy of profound wisdom is on tap in the East” (Mencken 48).

<sup>4</sup> Georges Cirot, *Bulletin Hispanique* (1938-44); Barbara Fuchs, *Exotic Nation: Maurophilia and the Construction of Early Modern Spain* (2009).

Irving's attraction to Al-Andalus goes far beyond Orientalism, and even maurophilia, and makes a more universal statement about the mind of the romantic. Irving's romantic sentiments include elements that could be termed "proto-postcolonial," in the sense that he emphasizes cultures other than just Western civilization. This chapter argues that disillusionment is clearly one of the driving forces behind the romanticism of Irving, as it indeed is of Romanticism specifically.<sup>5</sup> Irving's romanticism is, at its heart, dissatisfaction with his own society. This is also an accurate description of the main character in James Hilton's novel *Lost Horizon*. One would expect, therefore, Frank Capra's 1937 film adaptation of *Lost Horizon* to continue the romantic quest for utopia. However, Capra's special brand of optimism brings a unique approach to the concept of disillusioned flight. Although the last chapter suggested that a strong link exists between early American Romance in literature and the idealistic themes in classic Hollywood cinema, Irving's expatriatism and Capra's are distinguished by a vast difference in their defining of utopia as "here" or "there," between quest and quest fulfilled. The journey from Irving to Capra is a shedding of the transatlantic aspects of romance. Thus, romantic notions exemplified by *Tales of the Alhambra*, such as Orientalism and escapism, are recontextualized through Capra's lens.

### **Romanticism and Disillusionment**

Disillusionment is a causal element of British Romanticism. Indeed, one of the identifying characteristics of the early British Romantics was a rejection of political solutions. William Blake, William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge actually began as great advocates for the French Revolution. Of the Revolution, Wordsworth said, "Bliss was it in that

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<sup>5</sup> Irving is romantic, but he is not a part of the literary movement we have termed Romantic.

dawn to be alive” (337),<sup>6</sup> and yet the enthusiastic endorsement of the Romantics would sour in the ugly light of the Reign of Terror.

. . . tyrants, strong before  
 . . . were ten times stronger now  
 . . . the crimes of few  
 Spread into madness of the many, blasts  
 From Hell came sanctified like airs from Heaven. (328)<sup>7</sup>

Wordsworth’s disenchantment is not veiled. “Whither is fled the visionary gleam? / Where is it now, the Glory and the dream?” (Wordsworth 435).<sup>8</sup> His disillusionment continued through the crowning of Napoleon, which Wordsworth referred to as a “dog / Returning to his vomit” (343)<sup>9</sup> and pronounced that “the sun / That rose in splendor . . . Hath put . . . his glory off” (343-44).<sup>10</sup>

Wordsworth sums up the futility of political solutions when he says, “This frame of things / Which ‘mid all revolutions in the hopes / And fears of Men doth still remained unchanged” (377).<sup>11</sup>

The solution of the romantic is to escape into, and immerse oneself in, Nature. The British Romantics found sublimity in both the grandeur of the Alps and the serenity of the English Lake District.<sup>12</sup> While their American counterparts, the Transcendentalists, had a greater

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<sup>6</sup> *Prelude* (1805), book X, l. 690.

<sup>7</sup> *Prelude* (1805), book X, ll. 309-14.

<sup>8</sup> “Ode [Intimations of Immortality].” ll. 56-57.

<sup>9</sup> *Prelude* (1805), book X, ll. 934-35.

<sup>10</sup> *Prelude* (1805), book X, l. 935-38.

<sup>11</sup> *Prelude* (1805), book XIII, ll. 448-50.

<sup>12</sup> Romantic flight did not always lead to the sublime. The “dark Romantics” such as Poe, Hawthorne and Melville explored those liminal spaces between good and evil, life and death, sanity and insanity. See Chapter Four for more on Melville’s “escape” into those uncomfortable twilight places of the human.



interest in political issues, especially slavery, they too were consumed with nature.<sup>13</sup> Yet whether fleeing into the countryside, fleeing into the mountains, or simply fleeing into the imagination, romance is clearly about flight. In the case of Irving, however, his escape was into the past.

Irving, Cooper and Scott preferred flight into those liminal spaces that exist between reality and fiction, between history and fantasy. “A hero of fiction that never existed is just as valuable to me as a hero of history” (W. Irving, *Sketch-Book* 103).<sup>14</sup> The borderline world where two forms of existence were indistinguishable is the realm of the Romantic. Irving celebrated the liminal spaces that existed between fact and legend. *Tales of the Alhambra* (1832) is a travel log interspersed with local lore. Yet despite, the upbeat tone of Irving’s writing, this too is a flight of disillusionment, for Irving exemplifies the expatriate. Many Romantics, propelled by disillusionment, only found more disillusionment. In this manner, Irving found his idealized Moorish Spain no harbor from his own personal harsh realities—just as Al-Andalus itself could not survive the Reconquista. Thus, disillusionment not only instigated romantic flight, it also accompanied it, and even succeeded it.

### **Romanticism, Orientalism and Al-Andalus**

Even the name of *Al-Andalus*, as opposed to *Spain*, befits Irving’s fascination for idyllic flight (see note 3). Irving’s projection of utopian attributes onto Al-Andalus prefigures Hilton’s Shangri-La and embodies Said’s notion of Orientalism. Nonetheless, some of Irving’s idealizing of Moorish Spain is deserved. “Islamic Spain would come in time to offer the fruits of a higher

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<sup>13</sup> For instance, Thoreau who wrote *Civil Disobedience* (1849) also acclaimed the insight that came from the seclusion of nature in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849) as well as *Walden* (1854).

<sup>14</sup> “The Boar’s Head Tavern, Eastcheap.” pp. 102-11.

civilization to barbarian Europe” (Fletcher 1). Furthermore, the relationship between Christians and Spanish Muslims, or Moors, was not continual antagonism. “Part of the greatness of Moorish culture in Spain lay in the harmonious co-existence of the Muslim, Christian and Jewish communities” (Burckhardt 23). This strange and uneasy association between Christianity and Islam often created beauty in the clash of these two styles, a mixture of “Moorish towers and Gothic domes” (W. Irving, *Alhambra* 1:62). In fact, as Richard Fletcher summarizes:

Between 712 and 1492 Muslim and Christians communities lived side by side in the Iberian peninsula, clutched in a long intimate embrace: sharing a land, learning from one another, trading, intermarrying, misunderstanding, squabbling, fighting . . . the most fortunate beneficiaries of this coexistence were neither Christian nor Muslim Spaniards but the uncouth barbarians beyond the Pyrenees. (8)

Indeed, this world of Al-Andalus was one in which art, architecture, medicine, mathematics, astronomy flourished far beyond the rest of Europe. The great universities of Toledo, Cordova, Seville, and Granada possessed, what Irving referred to as, “the treasured lore of antiquity” (*Alhambra* 1:72).

The tension which did exist between Christian and Moor fluctuated. In the beginning, Christians saw Muslims as less threatening than heretical doctrines within their own faith. Hostility during this period was as often present in the discord among Christians, as between Christian and Moor. However, the creation of Santiago de Compostela, a prominent medieval pilgrimage site, and the Crusades themselves forged the image of Moors as infidels and enemies. Finally, the religious justification for the Reconquista was indelibly etched in the Christian mindset with the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453. The rivalries of the many Christian kingdoms would ultimately find unification in the marriage of Ferdinand, King of Aragon and Isabella, Queen of Castile. The fall of Granada was not enough to complete this unification; the

new state required the expulsion of all non-Christians. What armies could not vanquish was purged by the Inquisition, until the glory of Moorish Spain was no more.

This lost society, as Irving points out, owed its singularity in no small way to its geographical uniqueness. “The immense plains of the Castiles and La Mancha, extending as far as the eye can reach, derive an interest from their very nakedness and immensity, and have something of the solemn grandeur of the ocean” (*Alhambra* 1:15). Fletcher, by citing a modern travel brochure, not only echoes Irving’s sentiments concerning the enchanting nature of Al-Andalus, but also demonstrates the lasting legacy of its romanticism:

Beautiful and fierce, seductive and pagan, Andalusia is a world unto itself. Probably No other region in Europe is so romantic, mysterious and atmospheric . . . with its incredible Moorish legacy, its vast mountains, parched plains, superb cities and magical villages (1-2)

In this world, Christians and Muslims lived on the fringes of their respective societies. As Nicole Clarke asserts, Al-Andalus possessed the “otherness of territory on the edge of the world” (84). As a romantic, Irving could not have helped but fall in love with the otherness of this other world. Indeed, “otherness,” and specifically the search for otherness, is at the core of Orientalism and fuels the romantic flight of both Irving and *Lost Horizon*.

The mystical atmosphere of Al-Andalus is keenly represented in the ethereal milieu of the Alhambra palace. “The Alhambra . . . encapsulates the conflict between the opposing demands of fiction and reality” (Rubin-Dorsky 216). This description of the Alhambra also comes very close to a perfect definition for *romantic*. Furthermore, within the Alhambra’s elegant halls are exquisite examples of the artistic decoration known as arabesque. These intricate designs, which signify the intertwined and infinite nature of existence, encapsulate the aesthetic appeal that Western writers found in Eastern culture. As Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky states,

the “Alhambra was a ‘world elsewhere’, its fascination, its lure, lay in the fact that it could induce and sustain illusion” (241).

As previously suggested, the allure of Eastern mysticism was not unique to Irving. Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan,” Lord Byron’s *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, and even Poe’s *Tales of the Grotesque and the Arabesque*, all reveal an undisputable obsession with a romanticized Orient. Moreover, Western enchantment with the East did not begin with nineteenth-century Romanticism. Orientalism dates back, at least, to the Middle Ages and the popularity of the *Travels of Marco Polo*. His travel adventures thrilled Europe with the exoticism of Asia and his writings were a great influence on Columbus. In the fourteenth century, Sir John Mandeville embellished his travel tales with history, customs, and local legends and Mandeville’s approach to travel literature is a precursor to Irving. Irving displayed, at a very early age, his love of romantic locations, even at home, especially those which offered an enchanting atmosphere. “The Kaatskill Mountains had the most witching effect on my boyish imagination” (P. Irving 1:42). Be it the Hudson River valley or the halls of the Alhambra, Irving’s writing are clearly travel literature, but by blending fact with fiction and descriptions of the picturesque with the quaint, Irving evolved it into an ideal genre for the Romantics. As Susan Manning says of Irving, “he was interested in composing not the ‘natural Picturesque’ . . . but what may best be described as the ‘cultural’ or ‘literary’ Picturesque” (xix).

In addition to a connection between travel literature and romance, another contributing element of romantic escapism, and indeed of Orientalism, is the concept of the “noble savage.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Early manifestation of the ‘noble savage’ even appear in medieval romance. In 1485, Sir Thomas Malory’s collection of Arthurian legends entitled *Le Morte D’Arthur* presents a rather sympathetic depiction of the “Saracen” in his character, Sir Palomydes. However, the term is usually attributed to John Dryden, appearing first in his 1672, appropriately enough, *The Conquest of Granada*:

This persona, exemplified by Daniel Defoe's *Man Friday* and James Fenimore Cooper's *Mohicans*, is closely linked with "primitivism." The latter is based on the romantic notion that so-called "backward" cultures actually hold greater insight than more "advanced" ones. As Hoxie Neale Fairchild states, "To me, a Noble Savage is any free and wild being who draws directly from nature's virtues which raise doubts as to the value of civilization" (2). Similarly, Irving's first work in Spain, *Christopher Columbus*, praises pre-Columbian indigenes. Indeed, Western fascination with the primitive was common enough that it engendered the unflatteringly phrase "going native." Primitivism is, in fact, a form of "golden-ageism," the belief that the best of all things lay in bygone cultures. Both primitivism and golden-ageism are prevalent in Irving: "The relics of times utterly gone by; of beings passed from recollection; of customs and manners with which ours had no affinity" (*Sketch-Book* 151).<sup>16</sup> He certainly held such sentiments toward the Alhambra, "nostalgia for a time that can never return is built into its self-expression" (xiv). The high level of cultural achievements by Moorish Spain make it difficult to call Irving's fascination primitivism, however, to Medieval Europeans, to be non-Christian was to be savage. Nonetheless, both primitivism and golden-ageism reside in the belief that enlightenment lay in cultures other than one's own. Veneration of the noble savage is in effect a love of the "Other."

Clearly, the romantic's love of otherness demonstrates disillusionment with one's own society. Whether Irving "went native" or not, he definitely identified with both the indigenous people he described in *Christopher Columbus* and the Moors of Spain. Irving was consumed by

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But know, that I alone am King of me.  
 I am as free as Nature first made man  
 'Ere the base Laws of Servitude began  
 When wild in woods the noble savage ran. (Part I, I.i.206-9)

<sup>16</sup> "Westminster Abbey." pp. 148-161.

the idea that something was lost in his modern society and, unlike Jonathan Swift, who saw the concept of utopia as ridiculous, Irving finds a perfect society in the bygone civilization of Andalusia; this was Irving's Shangri-La.

### **Irving in Spain: Dual Last Sighs**

By the time he published *Tales of the Alhambra* in 1832, Irving had already gained international acclaim with *A History of New York* (1809) and *The Sketch-Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* (1819-20). In 1826, he was invited to Spain by a member of the American diplomatic corps. *Tales of the Alhambra* was not the first Spanish-based project by Irving. His first endeavor, published in 1828, was a biography of Christopher Columbus. This work is a cross between fiction and history, a perfect liminal place for a Romantic. The lack of historical integrity in *A History of the Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus* survived long after Irving, as this work was credited, or blamed, for the misconception that medieval Europeans believed in a flat earth (Russell 51-57). The work, however, was well received and the connection that Irving felt between himself and Columbus was explicit. "As he [Irving] pursued his studies, he became fascinated with what he found of the moving drama of the Christian conquest of Granada" (Bowers 12). This led to the publication in 1829 of *Chronicle of the Conquest of Granada*. That same year, Irving travelled from Madrid to Granada.

Irving's Spanish writings, especially *Tales of the Alhambra*, in many ways resemble his famous and well-loved *Sketch-Book*. "His experiences and researches in Spain broadened his outlook and enabled him to present fresh subjects to a host of loyal followers who were captivated by his polished style and easy narrative manner" (Alderman 8). Irving's lyrical and lofty descriptions of natural beauty are evident in both works and those familiar with *The Sketch-*

*Book* and Irving's love of enchanting locations and eerie moodiness, would certainly have recognized the author's style in his depictions of Spanish locations: "some village perched on a steep hill, or rugged crag, with mouldering battlements and ruined watch-tower; a strong-hold" (W. Irving, *Alhambra* 1:14). Furthermore, on Irving's journey from Madrid to Granada, as his readers came to expect, he digressed into local legends. Irving was unable to look upon these modern Spanish locations and not see the invisible Moorish legacy.

. . . a long train of mules slowly moving along the waste like a train of camels in the desert, or a single herdsman, armed with blunderbuss and stiletto, and prowling over the plain. Thus, the country, the habits, the very looks of the people, have something of the Arabian character . . . The Spanish muleteer has an inexhaustible stock of songs and ballads . . . The couplets thus chanted are often old traditional romances about the Moors . . . Often the song of the muleteer is composed at the instant, and relates to some local scene, or some incident of the journey. This talent of singing and improvising is frequent in Spain, and is said to have been inherited from the Moors. (*Alhambra* 1:16-18)

Irving's proclivity for inserting local stories into his travel narrative is exemplified by that moment that epitomized the loss of this highly advanced culture. Of all the aspects of Spain that appealed to Irving, it is this liminal moment that evokes Irving's emotion as a hopeless Romantic. "It was from the summit of one of those hills that the unfortunate Boabdil cast back his last look upon Granada and gave vent to the agony of his soul. It is the spot famous in song and story as 'The Last Sigh of the Moor'" (W. Irving, *Alhambra* 1:67). Muhammad XII, also known as Boabdil, was the last ruler of Granada. Upon leaving the city he surrendered, he delivered his famous lament and was rebuked by his mother. "'You do well,' said she, 'to weep as a woman over what you could not defend as a man'" (W. Irving, *Alhambra* 1:161).

Such a dramatic moment captured the imagination of others beside Irving. In 1829, an English clergyman, George Hughes wrote *The Last Sigh of the Moor, A Poem*:

On every height, mosque, minaret, and tower,

The red-cross banners tell Castilia's power—  
 Too truly tell—his last strong-hold in Spain  
 Lost to his hope—the Moor has ceased to reign.

. . .

Nor he, the Prophet-god, whose conquering sword  
 Had won a world to faith, no more adored?  
 Yes! Fated city, all are passed away!  
 And he shall reign who claims diviner sway.  
 What though be passed the fame, the faith ye wore,  
 And Granada be perished to the Moor. (ll. 975-87)

The nineteenth-century French poet Theophile Gautier also commemorated this great moment of loss:

But now, cast down am I, distraught.  
 My army lies outdone, outfought,  
 Destroyed! And no one, nothing, naught  
 But my dark shadow follows me!

Farewell, Granada-loves galore!  
 Laughing Alhambra's crimson towers . . .  
 Cool gardens fraught with wondrous flowers,  
 Still, in my dreams, my waking hours,  
 Long will I see you, evermore!" (341)

The attraction to this tale continues to this day. In 2011, Lauryn Christopher published a short story using this famous title and Salman Rushdie has also used the same title for a recent novel.

Irving's connection to this tragic figure is clearly personal. It was inevitable that when it came time for Irving to leave Granada, he identified himself with the fated Moorish leader:

I took a last look at Granada from the height on the road of Padul, where the unfortunate King Boabdil wept as he was about to lose sight of his late capital forever. It still bears the poetical name of *el suspiro del Moro*, and they pretend to show in a rock the print of the hoofs of Boabdil's horse, when he stood as his rider gazed with tearful eyes upon Granada . . . Poor Boabdil . . . had turned his back upon all that was sweet and pleasant in life, and a stern and rugged and joyless futurity lay before him. (P. Irving 4:298-9)

Critics of *The Alhambra* quickly recognized the old enthusiasm absent since Irving's early work, but not everyone appreciated Irving's foreign fascination and many questioned whether Irving



had shed his Americanism. In defense of Irving's expatriatism, Rubin-Dorsky postulates that what drove Irving overseas was a search that paralleled America's own search for identity. The generation of the Revolution was passing away, and the young nation's identity in the early nineteenth century remained unformulated. Rubin-Dorsky suggests that a sense of displacement drove Irving overseas. "To a greater extent than the celebrated style, charm, humor or narrative ease of Irving's writings, it was his story of dispossession" that characterized his Spanish works (xiv).

Despite the obvious international flavor of Irving's writings in Spain, it can be argued that "Americanism" exists in them as well. Rubin-Dorsky observes that the prevalent public sentiment of the day was that the ideals of the Founding Fathers were impossible to live up to and that their zeal was gone. The country was experiencing a spiritual void. The paradox of this period was the combination of a sense of boundlessness and a sense of a loss of home. Rubin-Dorsky suggests that Irving's disillusionment was thus a truly American sentiment of the time.

In this respect he was a truly representative American author; almost all his productions from this period directly or indirectly chronicled his reaction to the failure of America to embody the principles and live up to the expectations of the founding fathers. Like so many of his fellow citizens, he could never quite transcend his despair over the decline of American ideals. (xv)

Therefore, according to Rubin-Dorsky, Irving's romantic quest allowed him to keep his American identity even while writing abroad.

Eventually, and perhaps inevitably, Irving's disillusionment would extend to Spain as well. Between 1842 and 1846, he returned to Spain and served in the diplomatic core. The pettiness and dishonesty of government work ultimately destroyed Spain as a haven for his Romanticism.

I am wearied and at times heartsick of the wretched politics of this country. . . . The last ten or twelve years of my life . . . has shewn [sic] so much of the dark side of human nature, that I begin to have painful doubts of my fellow man; and look back with regret to the confiding period of my literary career, when, poor as a rat, but rich in dreams, I beheld the world through the medium of my imagination and was apt to believe men as good as I wished them to be. (P. Irving 6:343)

Irving's loathing of bureaucracy mirrors Hawthorne's sentiments in "The Custom-House." It also suggests that romantic flight, instigated by disillusionment, often ends in only more disillusionment. In the end, Irving returned to America and continued to write, but never again with the enthusiasm he exhibited in *Tales of the Alhambra*. A similar romantic disillusionment is the essence of *Lost Horizon* and embodied in its main character, Conway. While Irving's connection to Conway is manifestly evident, the connection between both of them and Capra is much less tenable.

### **Romanticism and Capra**

The Introduction describes the numerous ways in which Frank Capra possesses attributes of early American literature, specifically in connection with Walt Whitman, and in more general terms with the pursuit of the American identity. As John Raeburn says of Capra, but is also true of Whitman, he saw America as "the country where the fate of the common man is of the utmost consequence" (ix). Similarly, Ray Carney equates the work of Capra with Hawthorne, Emerson and Whitman in that they all share "a visionary, idealistic, romantic strain" (3). Carney furthers the connection to Matthiessen's renaissance by opining that, although Capra is often characterized as a populist, he is actually a transcendentalist, not because his "films are muddled ideologically, but because they are engaged in an analysis of human experience deeper than that described by ideology" (6). A similar notion is expressed by Raeburn, "Capra's social criticism is not profound, nor was it meant to be. Descriptive rather than prescriptive, it is concerned with

what Capra defines as anomalies in a fundamentally healthy system rather than with inherent flaws in the system itself” (xi). It is this mixture of romance with social pragmatism which differentiates American and British Romanticism and also denotes the dual aspects of classic Hollywood in general, and Capra specifically—idealism and realism.<sup>17</sup>

Capra clearly demonstrates a patriotic zeal long attributed to immigrants of the early part of the twentieth century. Born in Sicily in 1897, his family came to America in 1903. As an immigrant, Capra was not unfamiliar with prejudice. In fact, in 1935, a major publication<sup>18</sup> referred to the popular film director as a “little wop” (Stuart 13). Such hostilities, however, did not dampen Capra’s view that America was indeed a land of opportunity. In fact, Capra was not just a rags-to-riches story for himself, but he, almost single-handedly, lifted Columbia Pictures from “poverty row” status. The view of America, often termed *Capraesque*, is most clearly on display in the three films that comprise the core of Capra’s canon—*Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), and *Meet John Doe* (1941). Many would also include the equally sentimental, yet undeniably darker, *It’s a Wonderful Life* (1946) in his definitive works. These are the films that most openly bare the director’s ideology. These are the films, in which, Capra “distilled the quintessence of the American Dream . . . [and] isolated the essential ingredients of the national philosophy” (Richards 234). However, Capra only achieved the status of “name above the title” because of his huge success with earlier comedies, specifically, *It Happened One Night* (1934). While films like *It Happened One Night* and later

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<sup>17</sup> See Carney, pp. xxi and 4, as well as Chapter One, pp. 42-44 and 47-48.

<sup>18</sup> *Collier’s*.

*Arsenic and Old Lace* (filmed 1941, released 1944) display the director's talent for deftly handling comedy, they offer a diminished opportunity to view Capra's thematic brushstrokes.

Capra's version of Hilton's *Lost Horizon* remains unique in that it displays neither an overt homage to "Americanism" nor an agile comic wit, routinely associated with Capra, yet the filmmaker was clearly drawn to its romantic sensibilities. As early as 1938, critics recognized the difficulty with including *Lost Horizon* in the Capra oeuvre. As a *Christian Science Monitor* piece on the filmmaker conveyed, "If you try to apply [the traditional] definition of Capra formula to *Lost Horizon*, you are in deep water" (Daugherty 5). Frank Daugherty also points out that Capra's next film, despite being based on a Kaufman-Hart play, was "nearer home" for him due to its comic nature. Indeed, a dearth of humor makes *Lost Horizon* clearly an un-Capra movie. In his study of Capra as a comedy director, Leland Poague writes:

The problematic nature of *Lost Horizon* as traditional Capra has been echoed by many: It falls short of success because Capra failed to observe the minimal structural requirements for the romance form. Even Capra's own atypical sort of romance is based upon struggle and crisis but *Lost Horizon* is much romantic ado about nothing, for it generally lacks any real dilemma whatsoever. (70)

Donald Willis proclaims that Hilton's book "wasn't really Capra material to begin with" (105). Even Ellen Draper, who argues for inclusion of *Lost Horizon*, admits that Capra's screen version of Hilton's work suggests "that Western men . . . may not be able to attain an earthly paradise at all" (20).<sup>19</sup> John Baxter, however, believes that "*Lost Horizon* is true Capra," but he bases his analysis on the opinion that the film demonstrates "individuality as the noblest force in man"

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<sup>19</sup> As we will see later, this also makes a connection between Capra's Shangri-La and Thomas More's *Utopia* in terms of attainability, see pp. 102-103.

(104). While this is surely an attribute of the Capra philosophy, it is not central to the book *Lost Horizon*.

Although this chapter demonstrates that Capra's brand of Romanticism is clearly a move away from traditional Orientalism, there is an argument that the East was an obsession for Capra and that his works indicate a globalist view. Elizabeth Rawitsch suggests that, "Looking at Capra in terms of America is defining him too narrowly" (35). However, Rawitsch's argument defending global tendencies in Capra's work rests too heavily on six of his most obscure works<sup>20</sup> and *Lost Horizon*, which, as previously argued, is hardly representative of Capra's work. Furthermore, in terms of a fascination with the East, only *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (1933) and *Lost Horizon* are set in Asia. In addition, many of Rawitsch's examples of ethnic variety, which she sees as evidence of globalism, are often fleeting cameo instances. The fact that Capra sprinkles various ethnic groups throughout his films is not proof of a global viewpoint, but does demonstrate a "melting pot" view of America. Most of all, this view of a globally-inclined and Easternly-disposed Capra, ignores the Americanness of his core canon of *Deeds-Smith-Doe*. Capra was not interested in a "global community." Capra was not like Conway. Capra's "perfect" community, although constantly in need of defending and rectifying, already existed.

Similarities between Conway and the Capra canonical heroes are severely limited. Capra's film adaptation is the story of British international hero, Robert Conway (Ronald Colman).<sup>21</sup> Conway is described as "England's man of the east—soldier, diplomat, public hero,"

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<sup>20</sup> *Submarine* (1928), *Flight* (1929), *Dirigible* (1931), *Forbidden* (1932), *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (1933), and *Here Comes the Groom* (1951)

<sup>21</sup> In the original book, the character's name is Hugh Conway. Perhaps, the first step in making the story more palatable to Americans was to change Hugh to Robert.

a precise and concise description of the romantic knight. However, on the verge of being named the next foreign secretary, Conway reveals that his wish is to end empty diplomacy, which he sees as always leading to war, and scrap all armies. Ultimately however, he relents and admits that he will do as he is told and “be a good boy.” Conway is evidently a self-doubting hero. He doubts his British, modern, “civilized” world, and doubts his own value as well. Conway’s cynical romanticism is the foundation of both Hilton’s book and the film, but it does not quite seem Capraesque. Certainly, Capra’s Mr. Smith begins to doubt the “system,” but it is a system in which Capra fundamentally believes; a tainted system granted, but one which is ideologically worthwhile. Smith’s doubt is only a momentary weakness. Conway’s doubt, from the perspective of the novel, is good; Smith’s doubt is defeatism. Conway’s doubt leads to flight. Smith’s doubt, although initially flight-prompting, ultimately leads to fight. This is the main difference between Conway and Capra. “Capra’s heroes have [no] intention of dropping out of society and lighting out for a more uncivilized sphere—they are social beings who need the community” (Raeburn xiii). Carney makes a similar evaluation when he states that American Romantics like Capra,

attempt to suggest that visionaries need not retreat to a . . . ‘world elsewhere,’ but undergo their imaginative experiences in their daily lives . . . Capra’s central figures can only be appreciated once it is understood that notwithstanding their dogged realism, they are Emersonian transcendentalists . . . they do not cut themselves off from society (9).

In this sense, Conway is not a typical Capra hero, just as Irving is not the same brand of Romantic as those authors of Matthiessen’s Renaissance. Conway is not a Capra hero; he is a leftover from Old World Romanticism and Orientalism.

The canonic Capra romantic hero, such as Deeds and Smith, exhibits that individual courage triumphs over collective evil. They became disillusioned with their specific system, but

they eventually, through traditional (and as Capra constructs them, American) values, prevail over their flawed systems. Indeed, Allen Estrin tells us that for Capra:

It is not specific errors in the social system that are of primary interest, but the manner in and degree to which the system has strayed from its popular moral base . . . the reformation of the spirit is more important than specific changes in the social structure. (16).

With this understanding of Capra's motives, Estrin places the director's ethos and its historic impetus:

Fashioned in a period of national doubt . . . economic failures . . . and rapid expansion of Fascism . . . threw into question the efficacy of the American system of democracy. The raison d'être of Capra's cinema was to reaffirm that system . . . by recalling great principles on which the republic was founded (16)

For Conway, however, the corrupt system is all of mankind and his disillusionment is with the entire world.

Thus, Conway is more comparable to Washington Irving than to Frank Capra or, more importantly, to Capra's traditional romance heroes. Deeds, Smith and John Doe struggle within their corrupt societies, while Conway seeks to flee from it. Solace for Conway is only found in flight and isolation—flight into a realm, where reality and fantasy mix, and isolated from all else—the traditional haven sought by traditional romantics.

To accept civilization as a lost cause . . . as Conway and those in Shangri-La do, is also to separate oneself from all responsibility for the fate of mankind, an idea which sharply contradicts one of the most essential concepts of Capra's cinema—the individuals responsibility to his fellow man. (Estrin 45-6)

While the use of fantasy to find deeper truth than reality clearly links *Lost Horizon* to romance in general, it is flight in the face of disillusionment which makes a stronger and more specific connection between *Lost Horizon* and Irving. As Irving's flight to Spain led many to call him un-American, so too is the 1937 film version of *Lost Horizon*, with its internationalism, at odds

with the prevailing American sentiment of isolationism. However, despite the Irvingesque notion that “a search for Shangri-La inevitably bridges cultures” (Campbell 90), this parallel between Irving and *Lost Horizon* is a complex and strained one because of America’s and Capra’s distinctly isolationist sensibilities at the time.

### ***Lost Horizon* (1937)**

Despite the deep philosophical difference between Capra and Conway, the film is actually, in terms of narrative, surprisingly faithful to the book. While fleeing a local revolution in China, Conway and his group of fellow travelers are hijacked to a remote Lamasery in the Himalayas, called Shangri-La—an idyllic society where time seems to have stood still and the peace-loving people have stored up all the treasures of culture. As a true example of Orientalism, Hilton’s book and ostensibly the film suggest a superior way of living lies in the East. Shangri-La also presents that liminal space, in which Irving was so interested, where fact and fantasy blend.

Some alterations in the screen adaptation are slight, like changing Conway’s first name, but of greater significance are the conversions which the characters undergo in their new utopian society. Mr. Bernard (Thomas Mitchell), or “Barney,” is an embezzler. Upon arriving in Shangri-La, Barney is only concerned with the gold he finds in the valley, but later, he develops a desire to design irrigation for the villagers. Alexander P. Lovitt (Edward Everett Horton), or “Lovey,” is a fastidious, comical figure, replacing Miss Brinklow, a missionary, who, in the book, serves the same purpose of being comically irritating. Lovey, who initially is fearful of his exotic surroundings, ultimately comes to embrace Shangri-La. Gloria Stone, a character absent from the book, arrives as a “fallen woman” with a fatal disease and finds renewal of both health



and spirit at this Tibetan utopia, implying that loose morality and bad health are connected, and that Shangri-La apparently cures both. This supports Said's contention that Orientalism is about using the East as a stage upon which Westerners discover their better selves. Every member of the group, with the exception of Conway's brother, George, comes to feel more needed in Shangri-La than they ever did in the outside world. So complete is Gloria's, Lovey's and Barney's acclimation to Shangri-La that when the chance arises to leave, all three decide to stay. This variance from the book indicates, on the part of Capra, a different view of Shangri-La's supposed perfection. The transformation of these characters from angry prisoners to willing participants in their adopted society shows that this utopia is not so perfect. As Katarzyna Pisarska writes, "Shangri-La in Capra's film is shown as capable of improvement as it can take advantage of the outside world's knowledge and initiative" (62). In Capra's ideology, utopia, be it Shangri-La or America, can always be better, and, as appropriate for Capra, the improvement is supplied by immigrants.

There are also two women inhabitants of Shangri-La who demonstrate Capra's "re-inventing" of the original novel and represent the flip-sides of the female in Capra romance. One is Sondra Bizet (Jane Wyatt), a complete invention of the screen adaptation, who provides a narrative purpose which classic Hollywood, and romance in general, often relegated female characters to, and one which mirrors issues of Orientalism. In Capra's film, she instigates Conway's kidnapping. In romance, the female often functions strictly to either inspire the hero to action or to hinder his quest, which parallels Said's view of Orientalism as presenting Easterners as either facilitating or thwarting the adventures of Westerners. In keeping with this point, it is the violence of Easterners, the opening revolution, which causes Conway's fleeing

China in the first place. Likewise, it is an Asian pilot that kidnaps Conway and his party, then conveniently has a heart attack—his purpose served, he can exit the stage. The same function could be said of women in classic Hollywood film. Sondra, like Asians, exists only to advance the quest of the hero or impede it. Yet Capra instills Sondra with elements of individuality, such as tying small flutes to pigeons so that when they fly, they make music,<sup>22</sup> making Sondra potentially more than just a plot device. Sondra also serves one of the Bordwellian cornerstones of classic Hollywood, the love interest. Although she is a representative of Shangri-La, she is not Asian, which would have violated unspoken rules of the day concerning miscegenation. The truly exotic female inhabitant of Shangri-La is Maria, the love interest for George. This character is a conversion from the book. In the film the Manchurian princess, Lo-Tsen, becomes the Russian Maria. This may well be as exotic as classic Hollywood was willing to go with a screen romance. While Sondra is inspiration for the better, Maria, who has supposedly lived in Shangri-La since 1885,<sup>23</sup> is a temptress for George, enticing him to take her from the mountain sanctuary. Upon leaving the valley, she quickly deteriorates to her proper age and dies. By luring George, and by brotherly extension Conway, away from Shangri-La, she represents the thwarter of the romantic quest and the converse of Sondra.

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<sup>22</sup> Sondra's tying of flutes to birds parallels Romanticism's attempts, despite an avowed admiration for nature, to actually harness it in the name of art. The Aeolian harp, an instrument which creates music when the wind passes through it, is the title of a 1796 poem by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Although Coleridge sees this harp as an example of the harmony of humanity and nature, in that both seek the aesthetic qualities found in their divine inspiration, the device also certainly represents man's desire to control nature and form it to his concepts of beauty. For a comparison, see the discussion in the last chapter of Hawthorne's use of romance as artifice.

<sup>23</sup> We see how much less exotic Sondra is than Maria when Conway learns of Maria's unbelievable, supposed age, Sondra eases Conway's curiosity by informing him that she is 30 years old.

From the opening title cards of the film the theme of utopia is discernable. The prologue states, “In these days of wars and rumors of war . . . Haven’t you ever dreamed of a place where there was peace and security—sometimes utopia—sometimes the fountain of youth—sometimes merely ‘that little chicken farm.’”<sup>24</sup> With this wording, Capra immediately connects a story of utopian flight to his “Norman Rockwell” tendencies. Both Shangri-La and America are sanctuary societies based on isolationism. “Capra’s films share a common assumption that America is the last, best hope of mankind” (Raeburn ix), which is also true of Shangri-La. Indeed, for Capra, America is Shangri-La.

From the very beginning of the film, Western attitudes toward the East are on display. Immediately after the prologue, the audience is immersed in a hectic, even riotous opening scene of Westerners attempting to board a plane in order to flee a local revolution in Baskul.<sup>25</sup> This scene reinforces concepts of the East as an extremely dangerous place for Westerners. Western attitudes toward the East are more untraditionally explored once the plane has left Baskul. Before they realize they have been kidnapped, Conway asks George if he has finished his reports. “Did you say that we saved ninety white people? . . . [George nods] . . . Hooray for us. Did you say we left 10,000 natives to be annihilated? No, you wouldn’t say that.” This scene is the worst in picture quality in the film’s restoration, since only a single multi-generation-loss source for it exists. Why was this scene removed so early on that almost no copies contained it?

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<sup>24</sup> During World War II, the opening title cards were changed from “local revolution” to “slaughter by Japanese hordes.” To explore further the idea of Hollywood’s talent for bending American films to propagandic purposes see Chapter Three.

<sup>25</sup> This action scene opens the film because Capra jettisoned the first two reels after a bad preview reception. The film had initially opened and closed with a framing device, which was more in line with the narrative structure of the book, but its removal gives the movie a more typical Capra feel—that of hurly-burly action.

The DVD extras posit that since the scene depicts Conway gradually becoming drunk, that it might have diminished Conway's heroic image. A more likely explanation is that it too strongly suggested the racist attitudes of the West. The postcolonial tensions on which Said's views are based are vividly on display in this long-missing scene and might well have been seen as offensive to America's closest ally, the British Empire.

In a similar revelation of Western attitudes toward other cultures, George asks, during their first dinner at Shangri-La, "How do we get back to civilization." Chang (H.B. Warner)<sup>26</sup>, the man who seems to be their host, replies, "Are you so certain you are away from it." A shot of Chang as he delivers this line, is immediately followed by a reaction shot of Conway, who simply smiles. Such a reaction shot is truly a contribution of the sound era to the language of cinema. It is more than just shot/reaction shot that characterizes two engaged in discourse, it also reveals the thoughts of a character without any need for their audible display. A solo shot of Conway, neither instigating nor retorting to dialogue, and his subtle and approving reaction to Chang's reproach to George's chauvinism, further tell us that Conway is the only one of his group that understands the insight of Chang's comment.

A subsequent scene between Conway and Chang demonstrates Shangri-La's connection not just to the general concept of utopia, but specifically to Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516). Chang tells Conway that in Shangri-La there is no crime. Chang suggests that what causes crime is "lack." This is the social concept of crime which is vividly expressed in the literature of social reforming writers like Charles Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell. It is also a very modern sociological and progressive view of crime. However, such a view of crime never explains

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<sup>26</sup> Although Warner is an American actor, and little is done to alter his appearance, his name tells us that his character is meant to be Asian.

white-collar criminals, which are the true villains in the Capra canon of Deeds-Smith-Doe. Chang opines that, “there can be no crime where there is a sufficiency of everything.” This echoes More’s utopia where there is no crime because there is no private property and that that one rule alleviated a myriad of sins.<sup>27</sup> Although undeniably utopian literature, More’s work is also dystopian literature.<sup>28</sup> In fact, utopia and dystopia are mirror images in a state of duality.<sup>29</sup> Aspects of More’s “perfect” society are less than desirable, leading many scholars to see More’s work not as a blueprint for a better world, but a satire on his current one. Capra’s subtle changes to Shangri-La and Hilton’s characters, and the ultimate disillusionment that Irving experienced in Spain demonstrate questioning of the perfection of the “perfect” society.

Just as More’s utopian solution—no greed means no crime—seems to be too simplistic to overcome baser human instincts, so too is Conway suspicious of Shangri-La’s equanimity. Conway says to Chang, “There’s something so simple and naive about all this, but I suspect there’s been a shrewd and guiding intelligence somewhere.” This suggests that the price of perfection is autocracy. In fact, it can be argued that utopian literature lost much of its original sway as its aesthetics were usurped by attempts at practical implementation of ‘realized

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<sup>27</sup> “The happiness of the Utopian republic, which has abolished not only money but with it greed! What a mass of trouble was cut away by that one step! What a multitude of crimes was pulled up by the roots!” (More, Thomas. *Utopia*. Ed. George M. Logan. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Norton, 2011, p. 95).

<sup>28</sup> The concept of dystopia also provides another distinction between Hilton and Capra. “The dystopia, which as a genre negatively mirrors the utopia, adopts different principles of text construction: it foregrounds narrativity at the expense of descriptiveness, and favors plot rather than setting” (Blaim & Blaim 10). Since film is so heavily based on causality and does not do rumination as well as literature, the previous quote sees Capra’s film as more concerned with the dystopian aspects of Shangri-La and explain the problem many saw in Capra tackling the novel in the first place due to its lack of conflict, a must for a Capra film.

<sup>29</sup> This duality originates in More’s very use of the Greek term. Eutopia and utopia are homophones, but the former means “good place” and the latter means “no place.”

utopias’—e.g. the French Revolution, the soviet Union, the Third Reich and Mao’s China just to name a few (Blaim and Blaim 7).

Conway is also troubled but intrigued by Shangri-La’s philosophy of sufficiency as it applies to sexuality. When asked what religion they practice in Shangri-La, Chang refuses to give it any name, but by defining it as a preaching of moderation, he underlies the Eastern philosophies of Hinduism and Buddhism—although the discouragement of excess is certainly also central to Christianity. Yet austerity is not a characteristic of Shangri-La. Chang says that the inhabitants are “moderately obedient, moderately chaste, and therefore moderately happy.” This seems to reject those elements of fanaticism found in many religions. However, the impracticality of such an adherence is apparent when Chang tells Conway that, in Shangri-La, one man would not take another man’s woman because it would not seem good manners. Conway asks what if the first man wanted the woman so bad that he did not care about good manners. Chang answers that in such a case it would be bad manners for the second man to refuse her to the first man. Conway recognizes that in Chang’s comment, there is “something not quite right with [his] reasoning.”<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, the discussion of women as possessions to be exchanged by men further signals flaws in the professed perfection of this utopia.

In one sense, the discourse between Chang and Conway suggests that Capra actually identifies more with Chang than with Conway. Chang is surprised by Conway’s amazement

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<sup>30</sup> In the 1964 film *Becket*, King Henry II after recognizing that his friend Becket is a man of honor and a collaborator, asks him how he combines the two. Becket explains that “one collaborates to survive” and that “honor is a concern of the living, one can’t be concern with it once one is dead.” The king smiles and says, “You’re too clever for me Thomas, but you know, there’s something not quite right with your reasoning.” Henry is prophetic since before the film is over Becket will find himself caught between honor and loyalty to the king.

toward Shangri-La. He asks if Conway, who has written so often about better worlds, simply fails “to recognize one of your own dreams when you see it?” This is surely Capra’s message to his fellow Americans, that they are so preoccupied with their own problems that they do not realize how great they have it compared to the rest of the world—especially those native born who might lack the depth of appreciation for the country which he feels immigrants like himself possess. While the suggestion that the answer to the Great Depression could actually lie in the Eastern philosophy of wanting less, and thereby being happy with less, would certainly have been a difficult sell to Americans in the 1930s, it does draw a connection between Capra’s homespun simplicity and Eastern philosophy. The idea that at the core of the American identity is some nugget of Eastern mysticism flies in the face of the American enterprising work ethic, but it does not conflict with members of Matthiessen’s canon. Thoreau and Whitman, both subtly, and at times overtly, display their philosophical connections to the East.

Conway’s suspicion that a “guiding intelligence” exists behind Shangri-La is not only correct but also illustrates the relationship of Shangri-La to the issues of nationalism which rage around Shangri-La. Eventually, Conway learns that Chang is not the leader of Shangri-La. Father Perrault (Sam Jaffe), a Belgian priest who first came to the Valley of the Blue Moon in 1713, is now the High Lama. This suggests that despite its Eastern attributes, a utopia must be the brainchild of a European. The year Perrault established Shangri-La is significant. Not only is it the eve of the Industrial Revolution, from which Romanticism fled, but also, and perhaps even more importantly, because of the rise of the Age of Nationalism. It is this modern concept of nationhood, and its corollary hyper-patriotism, with its birth in the eighteenth century, magnification in the nineteenth century, and cataclysmic, but perhaps inevitable, summit in the

twentieth century, which sets great armies marching in Father Perrault's day and now brings Shangri-La near to its fruition.

Father Perrault not only connects Shangri-La to the issue of nationalism, but he also personifies the romantic fascination with fantasy. Conway seems only mildly astonished to discover that Father Perrault is 200 years old. The idea that clean, natural living results in longer life is not an unusual premise. However, to live for 200 years takes *Lost Horizon* into the realm of fantasy. This is what romance does; it blends the reasonable with the fantastic, as evidenced by both Irving and Hawthorne as well as many others. Whatever dissimilarities there are between Capra and Irving, this is a commonality among all romantics. In the case of Capra, this materializes as a blurring of the reality of America with its idealistic goals. Furthermore, all three of the above artists contribute to building the American identity within the American myth. As Raeburn points out, "Capra's heroes . . . are ideal types, created in the image of powerful national myths" (xiii).

In what can be called the intellectual climax of the film, Capra's attraction to the novel becomes plain. In a scene which closely follows the book, the High Lama, or Father Perrault, relates not only his story to Conway, but also his philosophy and the exact nature of Shangri-La:

I saw all the nations strengthening, not in wisdom, but in their vulgar passions and the will to destroy. I saw their machine power multiplying until a single-armed man might match a whole army. I foresaw a time when man, exulting in the technique of murder, would rage so hotly over the world that every book, every treasure would be doomed to destruction. (Hilton 190)

However, Capra wishes to go even further and the following lines do not appear in the Hilton text:



Is there anything more pitiful? What madness . . . a scurrying mass of bewildered humanity crashing headlong against each other compelled by an orgy of greed and brutality.

These lines demonstrate that even when the text and the film differ in exact wording, they nonetheless share the spirit of this scene. Both Hilton and Capra depict Perrault as seeking to gather “all things of beauty and preserve them here, against the doom toward which the world is rushing”—a highly romantic goal.

Where Hilton and Capra differ in this scene, and it is admittedly ever so slight and yet nonetheless instructive, is the prophetic description of the culmination of this “orgy.” Both book and film acknowledge a resulting world in which Shangri-La, and its preserved cultural treasures, will finally make the Christian ethic a reality.<sup>31</sup> Capra, however, feels the need to reduce such lofty descriptions to expressing a way of life with one simple rule “be kind.” This sounds a great deal like Capra’s Mr. Smith who says the only reason for attempting to better the world is “one simple rule, love thy neighbor.” This is the essence of the Capra philosophy, present even in a work that is not originally his own. It is not lofty philosophical concepts that espouse Capra’s view, but simple language that the common Man can grasp.

In an attempt to make *Lost Horizon* more his own, Capra converts the international aspect of Shangri-La to his philosophy that community is indeed the answer to all ills.<sup>32</sup> Estrin reminds

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<sup>31</sup> In general, Hilton’s text, while maintaining Shangri-La to be the best of East and West, certainly forefronts the role Eastern writings and philosophies have played in forming this society much more than Capra does.

<sup>32</sup> Richard Griffith once “called the Capra films ‘fantasies of good will’ because their plots pivoted upon the fanciful premise that kindness of heart is in itself enough to banish injustice and cruelty from the world” (162). This is certainly not the message of Hilton’s novel. Griffith believes that *It’s a Wonderful Life* (1946), despite its fantasy, mixes realism more than earlier Capra films. Griffith believes the grittiness of Pottersville contrasts uncomfortably with the angelic aspects of the film. It also means that Hawthorne is most like the Capra of *It’s a Wonderful Life*.

us of Capra's "affection for small towns and rural folk, his suspicion of big cities and distaste for city slickers" (22), but in the 1972 book *Celluloid Weapon*, authors David Manning White and Richard Averson profess that:

*Lost Horizon* enabled Capra to comment on the need for human solidarity in a context that went way beyond the simple humanitarianism of a small town Mr. Deeds. The guru of Shangri-La, with his deeper wisdom, wanted to save the entire world. (69)

This is a highly questionable summation. First, it is arguable whether or not the goal of Shangri-La is to save the world. It certainly seeks to save culture, but this utopia is meant as a haven from the world while it destroys itself. Secondly, and more importantly, while Hilton is no doubt interested in global issues, the simplicity of "be kind" shows that Capra is decidedly infusing Shangri-La with homespun lucidity.

The conversion of the book's Mallinson to Conway's brother in the film exemplifies the tension between global connections and more local bonds. Conway tells George, when his brother asks him to leave with him, that the purpose of Shangri-La is "stronger than brotherly love." Capra never suggests that such choices are easy; in fact, they are often at the crux of his characters' conflict. Capra's heroes must always come to realize the value of community over more monolithic entities like business and government. In *Meet John Doe*, Gary Cooper's character turns his back on the camaraderie of his companion (Walter Brennan) to follow the quest, but the quest is tainted and when the quest falls apart, John Doe falls back on fraternal relationships. It is only personal relationships, as found in community, that can resurrect the quest. It again distances Capra from the Conway originally conceived in the book.

The conclusion of the scene between Conway and the High Lama also contains some disturbing imagery. Upon relating his strategy to preserve the treasures of the world and await

the remnants of humanity to turn to Shangri-La, the High Lama rises to finish his speech with an otherworldly wildness, if not demented look, in his face. At the very least, it may remind us of the connection between madness and romanticism.<sup>33</sup> More sinisterly, it recalls the darkest side of utopia, remembering that Hitler too saw himself as the last bastion of civilization.

For all its enlightenment, Shangri-La carries endemic imperialism in that the Lama's elitism promotes international cultural hegemony. Joseph McBride writes that "despite Conway's avowed distaste for British imperialism, *Lost Horizon* is essentially an imperialist fantasy . . . Shangri-La is a white-run aristocracy" (356-57). These are not the descriptions of a view in praise of global equality among nations. Pisarska similarly sees Hilton's book, at least upon initial inspection, as Orientalism in that it presents the East as a remedy for the problems of the rest of the world. She also sees this as only slightly veiled colonialism (63). Visually, Capra's Shangri-La, while superficially displaying Eastern touches in accoutrements, offers sets that are more Art Deco than Asian. As suggested earlier, Buddhist and Hindu philosophy has been nearly eclipsed by Christian ideology. As Draper states, "Capra's film replaces the tranquil self-renunciation of the lamas in Hilton's novel with Western values" (19). The Lama tells Conway, "You will preserve the fragrance of our history." Of course, postcolonialism and multiculturalism beg the question, "Whose history?"

In addition to issues of cultural hegemony, there is also contained in the Lama's doctrine a trace of transatlanticism. The Lama foretells that Conway will survive the storm brewing in

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<sup>33</sup> In Cervantes' 1615 work, the figure of Don Quixote, as is appropriate for the "first novel," represents the insanity of romance in a world of realism, but in the 1964 Broadway musical, *Man of La Mancha*, Cervantes' satirical hero has been co-opted by the other side. In this play, the connection between poet and madman receives much more favorable treatment and Romanticism becomes the salvation of Man against the ugliness of realism.

the outside world. In addition to preserving the great cultural treasures, the Lama predicts that Conway will also “add to it a touch of your own mind.” This is acute transatlanticism in the sense that America is not an aberration from but continuation of the heritage of English literature, that Irving and even Hawthorne and Melville carry on the cultural tradition of Shakespeare and are not a bastard offspring. Even further, as Emerson said, one day Great Britain would only be able to take pride in her children’s accomplishments (5:275).<sup>34</sup> Thus both America and Shangri-La are not as multicultural as they project. Furthermore, if America and Great Britain are indeed one culture, then even transatlanticism can be a tool of Anglo-superiority and a promoting of cultural hegemony.

The overall structure, however, of both Shangri-La and the United States in the 1930s, is not transatlantic, nor global-looking in any way; it is isolationist. America like Shangri-La must not be embroiled in European upheaval. Both must remain a haven, so as to redeem mankind. Just as the High Lama sees Shangri-La as the savior of humanity, so too did Winston Churchill wish the United States to one day shed its isolationism and save the Old World. The main difference, of course, between Churchill and the High Lama is that the latter perceives peace as the means for saving civilization, while Churchill sought a militaristic savior. With this in mind, the most fantastical aspect of Shangri-La is the notion that a culture can persevere against violence without the use of force. That makes America a realistic Shangri-La, not pure European romance, but the hybridized form of American Romance,<sup>35</sup> a uniquely Capraesque utopia, one of

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<sup>34</sup> “Stonehenge.” Ch. XVI of *English Traits*, (1856). See Introduction p. 1 for full quote.

<sup>35</sup> See pp. 44-46, 51, and 54-55.

which Irving and the British Romantics might not approve, but one of which Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman definitely would.

Visually, there is little mistaking this film's romanticism. The "never-never land" atmosphere of Shangri-La is visual romanticism and is created not only by an eclectic mix of architecture and fashion, but also in the use of very unrealistic lighting. Father Perrault appears with a highly intrusive backlight, which could never be supplied by the single candle next to him and gives him an ethereal glow—a halo. The light around the Lama, supposedly sourced by the candle beside him, goes out when the Lama dies. The visual suggestion is that the light of Shangri-La has gone out. We cut to a shot of the wind blowing in through the open window, presumably the cause of the extinguished light. As in American Romance, this offers a practical explanation for the seemingly "marvellous" and exhibits a reliance on conspicuous symbolism.<sup>36</sup>

Lastly, the altered structure of the 1937 film reveals insight into the very relationship of film and romance. The entire Shangri-La story is framed by Hilton with the book's narrator reading about Conway. This performs the same function as the unreliable narrator—plausible deniability. In film, however, what the camera shows is unambiguous and therefore cinema has difficulty entering the realm of quasi-reality that is characteristic of American Romance.<sup>37</sup> In the film, there is no doubt as to the reality of Conway's adventure as there is in the book. The removal of the film's framing device makes a more cinematic experience but weakens the story's connection to literary romance. In addition, the removal of the framing narrative also creates an

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<sup>36</sup> Some of the most poetic images in the film are in the burial ceremony of the High Lama. The extent of this sequence is shortened even in the restored version, but, in the DVD extras, we see three additional shots, totaling 2½ minutes. The significance of these shots is that they are the only footage where the original negative was available.

<sup>37</sup> See Chapter One, pp. 43-44, 49-50, 52, 54-55.

extremely choppy conclusion to the film. The film originally had the story of Conway and Shangri-La bookended by the newly found but amnesic Conway, who, on a boat headed home, suddenly remembers Shangri-La and tells his companions, including the character of Gainsford, the entire story. Without the framing device, the character of Gainsford appears from nowhere for just the last five minutes of the film and the news that Conway has amnesia serves absolutely no purpose. Moreover, the removal of the framing device, by virtue of the loss of plausible deniability, actually lessens the film's connection to American literary romance.

The many alterations, documented in this chapter, between the book *Lost Horizon* and its 1937 film adaptation, even though some are minor, betray a palpable distinction between Hilton and Capra, and therefore, between Capra and Irving. Not least of these modifications is the story's denouement. The difference between "I hope he finds his Shangri-La" and one where Conway actually returns to the Valley of the Blue Moon is more than just the imposition of the Hollywood convention for a happy ending. It is the difference between a man in search of Shangri-La (Hilton's Conway and Irving) and a man who has found it (filmic Conway and Capra). The connections between Irving and Conway are much more striking than any parallels between either of them and Capra. All three men were attracted to the concept of Shangri-La and the need for it to be an isolated community. However, Irving and Conway went in search of their ideal society; Capra believed he had already found it in America. The fingerprints of Capra's New World ethos can be found amid the Old World trappings of *Lost Horizon*.

## Chapter Three

### **Observed Lives: *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin and Sergeant York (1941)***

It is said of Alvin C. York, famous American World War I hero, or at least of his persona as created on screen, that he “represented the American ideal of Anglo-Saxon self-sufficiency” (Birdwell, “Alvin” 323), that he was an “archetypal American hero, who sprang from humble origins to greatness” (Birdwell, “Alvin” 324), and that he was “the symbolic essence of America” (Birdwell, *Celluloid* 323). These descriptions are almost indistinguishable from comments about Benjamin Franklin, or at least his literary persona, which converts his “extraordinary achievements...into ordinary accomplishments [seemingly] within the reach of all citizens” (Schueller 105), and that he was a “hero [who] responds to the several kinds of disorder which he confronts” (England 425), “self-reliant, unpretentious, yet thoroughly accomplished” (Conn 1). The descriptions are virtually interchangeable. Both Franklin and York have more in common than similar summary praise. They are both historical figures who have been used to expound what the American identity, at a moment of transformation, should be.

Although many types of fiction exploit historical events and figures as source material, there are three genres that make a singular but dubious claim to accuracy: the biography and the autobiography in literature and, their cinematic cousin, the “biopic.” When Birdwell describes a life which “captured the American imagination for what he represented: an humble, self-reliant, God-fearing, peaceful man, who had fought his country’s enemy only after great deliberation” (“Change” 23), he is not only again demonstrating the similarity between York and Franklin, but

also the allure that such larger-than-life figures hold for the creators of the above listed genres. Yet specific works within these genres commonly suffer from claims of inaccuracy, character manipulation, and appropriation of fact to accomplish authorial intent. It is the melding of fact with such purposes that often leads readers, viewers and historians to cry “foul” as well.

The author/filmmaker creates a specific literary or screen persona, to one degree or another distinct from the depicted historical figure, which can quite literally write history with lightning. One of the most memorable incidents in the *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*,<sup>1</sup> both in fiction and actuality, is Franklin’s experiment with electricity. Similarly, in the film *Sergeant York*, the hero’s great moment of conversion occurs with a near-fatal strike of lightning. Whether these fictionalized events are complete fabrications or only slight embellishments, such manipulation of history can be employed for narrative requirements or to increase entertainment value, but they can also have less innocuous motives. Such artifice often serves more devious intentions such as abetting rhetorical purposes, i.e. to persuade.

The fictionalizing of historical figures is quite often synonymous with mythologizing them. Biography, as is the case with any genre, derives its structure “from the archetypal depths of myth” (Altman 20). According to Rick Altman, genre is based on the fact that myth is more satisfying than the imperfect world of reality (49). Thus, we begin to see myth creation and even myth identification as being goal-oriented:

[Myth] directs individual energies toward a common goal, by evaluating forms of behavior, delineating appropriate roles, and making it generally possible for individuals to relate their lives to a larger pattern of value and purpose, to transcend their existential limitations and to extend beyond their proper selves their sphere of influence. (Spengemann and Lundquist 504)

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<sup>1</sup> Franklin always referred to this work as his *Memoirs*. His life story was not referred to as his *Autobiography* until 1797, seven years after Franklin’s death.



Such a conscious effort, as William Spengemann and L. R. Lundquist jointly describe, must be examined with an admittedly pejorative term in mind—propaganda.<sup>2</sup> Due to the pejorative use of the term, the tendency is to conflate propaganda with lies. However, accuracy, or inaccuracy, has no part of the definition of propaganda. Therefore, the defense, which we shall see later, that a work is not propaganda because it is “truth,” is in fact no defense at all.

While the lack of “truth” is not a necessary component of propaganda, intent definitely is. When the goal is *myth building*, be it the myth of an individual or the myth of a national identity, historical accuracy is expendable when it conflicts with this intent. The intention to persuade, and more specifically to create an exemplary national identity, is most decidedly part of *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* and *Sergeant York* and imperative to the argument in this chapter.<sup>3</sup>

Franklin’s *Autobiography*, in addition to its overt and stated goals, exhorts Americans to embrace those attributes that distinguish them from being just a variation of Englishmen. Although Franklin’s fellow colonists shared with Great Britain a common language; a common literature; a common history; for many, a common faith; and even, at least until the Revolution, common politics; in order to have a new nation, they would need to no longer see themselves as British, but American. Susan Castillo states that “in his autobiography, Franklin constructs himself as protagonist . . . relating his life from the perspective of a tolerant, worldly wise,

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<sup>2</sup> Propaganda, properly defined, is never any single work, but a systematic effort, incorporating many different works, across many mediums, to persuade or control public opinion.

<sup>3</sup> Both of these works remind us that transatlanticism is not restricted to a connection between Great Britain and the British colonies in North America and later the United States. Transatlanticism, which defines the entire Atlantic as one community, requires an examination of, among other relationships, the link between France and the embryonic United States. Within this scope, it is interesting to note that Franklin’s *Autobiography* was not only partially written overseas, but was also first published in France and in French. Likewise, we must note that Alvin York’s battlefield heroics took place in France.

elderly narrator.” Castillo echoes the view of many in seeing Franklin as “the creator of the myth of the American as self-made man” (67).

Similar to Franklin’s *Autobiography*, this chapter argues that *Sergeant York* seeks to create, or, more appropriately, refashion identity. Americans had employed Franklin’s self-made, industrious, self-reliant image to carve from the wilderness a world of freedom (ignoring racial inequalities) and opportunity (ignoring the Depression), and above all, a world unencumbered by the incessant warfare and political upheaval of the Old World, most prominently on display with the looming specter of the Second World War. Despite self-reliance and the inoculation of two oceans, some believed the United States could no longer turn its back on the rest of the world.<sup>4</sup> Just as Franklin sought to change Englishmen into Americans, *Sergeant York* sought to convert the American identity from a concept of nationalism to internationalism. The rugged individual must become a citizen of the world—a concept of American identity which remains a controversy to this day.<sup>5</sup> While Warner Bros. may have been asking Americans to see a new identity, different arguably from the Franklinesque one that they and their contemporary fellow citizens had grown up with, they nonetheless were employing the same tactics for shifting national identity that Franklin had employed.

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<sup>4</sup> Theodore Roosevelt had said that “I come to the view that in a really tremendous world struggle, with a great moral issue involved, neutrality does not serve righteousness; for to be neutral between right and wrong is to serve wrong.” Unfortunately for those who in the late thirties fought against isolationism, Teddy Roosevelt’s words had been advocating entrance into the First World War, and by 1937, two-thirds of the United States population felt their involvement in World War I had been a mistake.

<sup>5</sup> Although Franklin helped to create the myth of the self-made man, the idea of Americans as citizens of the world would not have been an uncomfortable one for him. Through his international presence, the great diplomat brought Americanism, accurately or not to the world. He wore a coonskin hat in Parisian salons because they expected all Americans to be frontiersmen.

### **The Biography, the Biopic, and the Autobiography as Myth Building Genres**

The act of imaginative re-creation . . . allows the spectator to imagine they are ‘witnessing again’ the events of the past. (Burgoyne 7)

Be it the biography, the autobiography or the biopic, we know that history, in each of these genres, is entering the realm of fiction.<sup>6</sup> Central to each “is the urge to dramatize actuality” (Bingham, *Whose Lives* 253). Even the most historically-inclined biographer, just by the act of using language, has subordinated actuality to the functions of characterization and cause-and-effect narrative. The biography “is always a highly interpretive act” (Rosenstone, “In Praise” 13). Despite whatever claims to accuracy the genre may make, “biographers know that they are inventing” (Blackscheider 18). Through his own unique style and tone, the biographer is transformed “from a journeyman of lives into a creative writer of non-fiction” (Nadel 11). It is through the techniques of fiction that a biographer instills their imagination into the material (Heilbrun 305) and creates “the illusion of fact and order in the biography” (Nadel 5).

Thus biography clearly qualifies as fictional literature and assumes some of the characteristics that Hawthorne saw as the crux of his preference for the romance over the novel—the notion that there can be great truth outside of mimetic realism.<sup>7</sup> In fact, Ira Nadel asks, “what insights can fact alone tell us about a subject?” (5). Nadel answers his own question in a manner congruent with Hawthorne: facts possess an “inability to explain the configurations of life” (7). Robert Rosenstone puts it in even more extreme terms when he opines that historical depictions “must be fictional in order to be true” (*Visions* 70).

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<sup>6</sup> Roland Barthes declared that “every biography is a novel that dare not speak its name” (89).

<sup>7</sup> See Chapter One, pp. 47-48, 51 and 56-57.

As biography centers on an individual life, the greatest infusion of literary, or cinematic, imagination is displayed in the handling of the central character. “Who can write a biography without inventing a life? A biographer, like a writer of fiction, imposes a pattern upon events, [and] invents a protagonist” (Heilbrun 297). When depicting historical figures, intention is not always a single motive, but whatever the ulterior intentions might be, the first and obligatory goal must be the creation of the figure’s persona. While traditional biographies most often attempted to heroize the central figure, and even more modern “life stories” sought to expose or demystify a historic personage, both first required the creation of a literary or cinematic persona, separate from the real figure—they both need a “character.” Rosenstone tells us that the central character’s “individuality is less important than his symbolic or emblematic role,” and that he/she should “suggest something about the larger issues of the times in which he lived” (“In Praise” 28).

Biography then is, as any other literary form, a tool of authorial intent. As Rosenstone reminds us:

Biographer and filmmaker both appropriate some of the trace details left by a life and weave them into a story whose theme infuses meaning into the days of their subject. The resulting work is ultimately based less on the raw data than on that data incorporated into a vision created by the literary (or filmic) skills of the biographer (“In Praise” 14).

The key terms in Rosenstone’s observation are *vision* and *theme*. If all the biographer can be accused of is infusing history with his/her vision, that might only apply to the author’s concept of their “hero,” or even their concept of themselves, since biographical figures “provide idealized mirror images for our identification” (Bingham, “Lives and Times” 253). However, with the word *theme*, the implication can no longer be avoided that the author has some philosophical intension, which goes beyond simple character presentation, and is influenced by, as the author

sees it, the societal effects and influence on and by the character. As Cohen writes of all genres and is especially true of biography, “the purposes they serve are social” (210). The biography would then seem ripe for propaganda. Heilbrun warns us that “biography as fiction is our only defense against biography as coercion” (304), but it is in fact fictional biography itself that is coercion.

Much of what is true of the literary biography—history, structure, and authorial intent—are also true of the biopic. Beginning with Warner Bros.’ *Disraeli* (1929), the biopic became a genre that was as prestigious as it was ridiculed. It also became a staple of classic Hollywood as evidenced by the “almost three hundred biopics [which] were produced by the major studios during the classical period 1927-1960” (Custen, *Bio/Pics* 3). During the thirties alone, Hollywood created *Alexander Hamilton* (1931 - Warner Bros.), *Queen Christina* (1933 – MGM), *The Scarlet Empress* (1934 – Paramount), *Viva Villa* (1934 – MGM), *Mary of Scotland* (1936 – RKO), *Marie Antoinette* (1938 – MGM), *The Adventures of Marco Polo* (1938 - Samuel Goldwyn Productions), *Stanley and Livingston* (1939 - 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox), *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex* (1939 - Warner Bros.), *The Story of Alexander Graham Bell* (1939 - 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox), *Juarez* (1939 - Warner Bros.), *Young Tom Edison* (1940 – MGM), and *Abe Lincoln in Illinois* (1940 – RKO). In addition, if prestige is to be measured by awards, these films were not only copious but highly esteemed as well. Academy Awards for Best Actor went to Paul Muni for the 1936 Warner Bros.’ *The Story of Louis Pasteur* and to Spencer Tracy for MGM’s 1938 *Boys Town*. Even more prominence came with Best Picture winners *The Great Ziegfeld* (1936 – MGM) and *The Life of Emile Zola* (1937 - Warner Bros.). This partial list demonstrates that even though every studio tried their hand at the biopic, it was MGM and

Warner Bros. who were the experts. MGM, whose specialty was the musical, focused on the opulence of historical drama, while Warner Bros., best known for personal drama and newsreel-like presentation, such as their gangster films, concentrated on the individual rather than the spectacle.

It is necessary to distinguish the biopic from other historical dramas. The 1953 film *From Here to Eternity* culminates a rather melodramatic intertwining of several fictional characters, with a historic event—the attack on Pearl Harbor. In this sense, it lays the floor plan for a film like *Titanic* (1997).<sup>8</sup> This capping of fiction with history differs from the structure of autobiography, memoir or biopic in that the latter forms must weave historical elements throughout their text. However, they are similar in that they all infuse imagination into the characters whether those characters are based in fact or fiction. This is the strong link between “historical fiction” and “imaginative non-fiction.” Franklin’s *Autobiography* and *Sergeant York* both fall into the latter category.

Dennis Bingham feels that the biopic is so loosely defined that there are many misconceptions of it. For instance, very few are cradle-to-grave narratives and yet Bingham believes that that perspective is a prevalent one (“Lives and Times” 236). While birth-to-death is not required for a biopic, the characteristic is indicative of an attribute that does define the genre. The movie must be about a main character—that is the essence of biography. Thus, *The Alamo* (1960 or 2004) and *The Longest Day* (1962) are not biopics despite their clear historical material. The discernment becomes more difficult if the film has a central historical character but deals more with a single event in their life rather than an overview of their life, such as *A Man for All*

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<sup>8</sup> The structure of these two films reminds us how strong the legacy of classic Hollywood is even to this day.

*Seasons* (1966). Even more problematic is Steven Spielberg's 2012 *Lincoln*. The title suggests biopic, but the film is clearly about the historical fight for the thirteenth amendment, revealing that the title of the film plays an important role in determining genre status.<sup>9</sup> Belen Vidal reminds us that unlike "other film genres placed at the intersection of fiction and history"<sup>10</sup> . . . in the biopic an individual's story comes to the fore. Personality and point of view become the conduit of history in stories that often boil down complex social processes to gestures of individual agency" (3). In many cases, those two contrary forces, society and the individual supply the driving narrative force of the biopic—it certainly does in *Sergeant York*.

Many of the characteristics of the biopic are similar to those of the written biography previously mentioned. "The biopic provided many viewers with the version of a life that they held to be the truth" (Custen, *Bio/Pics* 2). In addition, it "was embroiled in the same controversies about truth, accuracy, and interpretation as its literary predecessors" (Custen, *Bio/Pics* 6). Just like its written counterpart, the biopic is "an enormous, engaging distortion, which after a time convinces us of its own kind of authenticity" (Custen, *Bio/Pics* 7). According to George Custen, the biopic is based on the single concept of *fame* ("Mechanical Life" 135), but the great deeds of great personages must never seem outside the capabilities of the viewer. This aspect of the biopic is also critical to understanding the persona created by Franklin in his *Autobiography*. "The comforting genius of these films [is] to suggest that despite the

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<sup>9</sup> Another example of how a title effects our perception of biography is that no one insists that *Valkyrie* (2008) is a biopic, but what if nothing of the film were changed except its title and the film had been called *Von Stauffenberg*? Then suddenly, we must include it, or at least examine it, in the realm of biopic.

<sup>10</sup> Remember that the premise of Chapter Two is that film is more like romance than the pure realism of the novel because of its hybridization of fact and fiction.

untouchability of their deeds, despite their unusual gifts, most of the greats are normal, just like you and me” (Custen, *Bio/Pics* 176). When Nick Roddick spoke of “ordinariness, elevated to the status of folk myth” (200), he was referring to Alvin C. York, but it fits Franklin as well.

Whether the biopic exalts the highborn or the lowly who rise to greatness, the audience must find some ability to connect with the central character. This is why films that are about nobility often include the words “private lives” in their titles. “All cinematic lives had to be understandable in terms that viewers would find congruent with their own experiences” (Custen, *Bio/Pics* 20). In the previous sentence, Custen summarizes the many memos of 20<sup>th</sup> Century-Fox head Darryl Zanuck that emphasized audience identification as necessary for the financial success of a film. In addition, audience identification is equally necessary if a film is going to attempt to persuade its audience to a particular point of view.

One aspect that the biopic has, which biographical literature does not, is the exploitation of the star system. Classic Hollywood utilized the star system for audience recognition and marketability, but it also was a reciprocal relationship when it came to the biopic. The celebrity status of a star could enhance the prestige of a biopic just as the magnitude of the historical figure portrayed amplified the reputation of the star. “The actor is the cornerstone to the biopic’s edifice of historical allusion,” as is Franklin’s renown to the believability of his *Autobiography*, and “performance is the emotional hook for the spectator’s investment,” as is the seeming self-effacement of Franklin’s persona (Vidal 11). It is not an over-statement to suggest that the biopic was able to become the staple of classic Hollywood because of the studio star system.

The biopic trades on a sense of authenticity that stems from the actor’s body itself . . . a set of expectations shaped not only by an audience’s knowledge and emotional response to the person portrayed but also . . . by a history of previous representations—what could be called a collective social memory or even ‘icon’ memory (Vidal 11).



This relationship is as true for the historic Franklin and his literary persona as it is for the relationship between Alvin York and Gary Cooper. Cooper lent recognizable and visible screen heroism to an actual war hero and the role of York brought Cooper the Oscar for Best Actor.

Though biopics are quite often seen as prestige projects, the genre is just as often disparaged. In fact, Bingham considers the biopic to be “the most maligned of all film genres” and that the term itself is often pejorative (*Whose Lives* 11-12). The acrimony toward the genre is clear in a 2005 interview with John Tibbetts when the interviewer, Jim Welsh, says, “The biopic is a mendacious genre that may have little to do with historical or biographical truth. Can you justify your interest in movies that exist mainly to tell entertaining lies?” (87). Much of this enmity is understandable from a narrative sense. A biography, literary or cinematic, tends to have the narrative organization of a diary—no supposition, conflict, resolution—just a series of events as, one could argue, life does. This simplistic story structure often leaves an audience unsatisfied (Joannou 147). This is not surprising as “God writes bad drama,” meaning that real life events do not conform to neat acts and scenes. Thus, the biopic often combines two seemingly contradictory qualities, prestige and lack of artistic value. As Vidal expresses it:

Mired in its own sense of self-importance, the biopic commands as much critical derision as industrial visibility . . . The genre sits at the rearguard of aesthetic innovation. However, the perception of the biopic as tepid and heavy handed . . . seems out of step with the incessant flow of [such] productions . . . [the biopic] eludes traditional critical distinctions between popular and art cinema. (Vidal 2-3)

The dichotomy that analysts find in the biopic is actually very unsurprising. When a work of “art” seeks to have a purpose other than to entertain, when it becomes propagandistic, then artistic structure very often becomes subordinate to goal. Similarly, one of the perceived weaknesses of the biopic, its tendency to oversimplify historical situations, is also

understandable, not just due to the time constraints of watchability, or even to “dumbing down” complexities for the “common” viewer, but even predictable when the film attempts to manipulate attitudes.

By the close of the classic Hollywood era, a dramatic shift in the content of the biopic occurred.<sup>11</sup> As Custen writes, “We no longer believed in greatness . . . The very ideas once taken to be quasi-sacred now seemed pedestrian and old-fashion” (“Mechanical” 131). Bingham points out that the changes in the biopics since the end of classic Hollywood have pursued what many critics see as the “warts and all” biopics, and “non-linear investigation of an enigma” (“Lives and Times” 249). However, he also fails to point out that his examples—*Silkwood* (1983), *Kinsey* (2004), *Milk* (2008), and *The Iron Lady* (2011), as well as many he does not mention such as *Gorillas in the Mist* (1988), and *J. Edgar* (2011)—all have a decidedly political cause which they advance. The biopic has become incredibly linked to propaganda—i.e. a clear attempt to shape public opinion. In this sense, while certainly less idealized, they are truly the progeny of *Sergeant York*.

The rhetorical quality of the biography, whether on page or screen, whether concerning one’s self or another, can be as relatively innocuous as in *fame* versus *greatness*, but can also deal with issues of “great pith and moment.”<sup>12</sup> The latter is certainly the case when Mary Joannou and Steve McIntyre write that “the object of filmic reconstruction of the past, as in the

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<sup>11</sup> There was also an earlier shift in the content of the biopics within the classic period. “The second era of biopic production, from 1941 to 1960, was dominated by a new kind of elite. The entertainer rather than the political leader became the paradigmatic famous figure” (Custen, *Bio/Pics* 84). Bingham sees this shift as part of a cultural tendency to conflate fame and greatness” (“Lives and Times” 233). However, one thing that remained the same was the “attempt to ‘normalize’ genius” (Custen, *Bio/Pics* 17). In this sense, the entertainment biopic shares much in common with Franklin’s *Autobiography*.

<sup>12</sup> *Hamlet*; Act 3, Scene 1.

biopic, must be to suggest meanings for the present” (148), or as Custen puts it, “the purpose of the biopic is to offer up a lesson or judgment in the form of a movie” (*Bio/Pics* 186). In this endeavor, the written biography and the autobiography, sharing the above cinematic traits, are uniquely qualified to succeed. It is the contrast between the individual and the collective that fosters this rhetorical capacity. Custen is speaking specifically of the biopic, but it is equally true of its literary counterparts, when he says,

A central conflict of the biopic . . . is the hero’s antagonistic relations with members of a given community. One might even go so far as to postulate that in this conflict, the hero is attempting to reformulate the boundaries of a given community. (*Bio/Pics* 72)

Indeed, the very assignment of the biography “is to enter the biographical subject into the pantheon of cultural mythology” (Bingham, *Whose Lives* 10), or put even more simply, “the biopic feeds fantasies of national identity” (Vidal 2). This identity-building aspect of a national cinema is particularly true of the biopic. “Finding a way to connect any life on film to that cobbling together of regional audiences which made up the fiction of the national audience, [is] linking the culture of Hollywood with the culture of America” (Custen, “Mechanical” 138). Custen’s description of the formative force of the biopic is equally true of the written biography and especially American literature, which found itself at the conversion of a colonial identity to a national identity. “They were agents of socialization . . . [which] assumed to be capable of actually teaching something [to] citizens of a young nation with an insecure identity” (Custen, “Mechanical” 141).

If all the above is true of the biography, what of its genre cousin—the autobiography? Regardless of whatever other motives may be present, the autobiography engages in self-aggrandizement. “Everyone realizes that one can believe little of what people say about each

other, but it is not so widely realized that even less can one trust what people say about themselves” (Glendinning xi).<sup>13</sup> If the persona in a biography can be manipulated for a certain effect, how much more so should the reader/viewer be wary of the persona in an autobiography? The autobiography, despite any claims to be a “tell all” or to show “warts and all,” will by sheer human nature tend to aggrandize its writer/subject. Philippe Lejeune defines autobiography as “retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality” (4). Many cite *The Confessions of Saint Augustine* as the genre’s archetype and William Howarth sees its development since then as “a history of the human mind, reflecting man’s rise from dogma to greater individuality” (363).<sup>14</sup> The autobiography, as the cross between the *confession* and the *memoir*, is the combination of the private and public man.<sup>15</sup> These two predecessors to the autobiography, the *confession* exploring the private life and the *memoir* chronically the public, are combined in the *autobiography*, at least as developed by Franklin.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> This quote by Dame Cicely Isabel Fairfield, whose pen name was Rebecca West, first appeared in the London *Sunday Telegraph* in 1975, but is cited here from Glendinning’s biography entitled *Rebecca West: A Life*.

<sup>14</sup> William Spengemann gives an overview of the development of the autobiography, evolving from Augustine’s *Confessions* (397-400) to John Bunyan’s *Grace Abounding* (1666), as becoming more reflective in its observations. Despite the expanding emphasis on personal experience, both authors acknowledged eternal truths that existed outside of the individual. Franklin, however, acknowledged personal experiences as the only source of truth (Spengemann, *Forms* 50, 57, 60-61). Franklin’s *Autobiography* is based on the concept of natural progress, the idea that the struggle of the individual resulted in an improvement for the whole world. This view was so essential to the Enlightenment and to Franklin, the American archetype of the Enlightenment (White 2-3).

<sup>15</sup> The conflict between the public and private man is very much on display in two scenes from *Sergeant York*: the solitude of the hero on the mountaintop and the ticker tape parade in New York for the returning hero. The latter is an element that the real York did not seek nor desire, but it was, nonetheless, extremely useful to Lasky and Warner.

<sup>16</sup> As James Cox reminds us, “The autobiography as a term did not exist at the time of the American Revolution” (255). “The confession was an account of a man’s private life, centering on his emotions,

Just as the biography lays claim to the presenting of “truth,” so too does the autobiography and specifically in its conflict of the public and private person. “The story-structure of autobiography is its mode of presenting truth . . . it is the story of identity as the tension between self-image and social recognition” (Shapiro 426). Again, we see the blurring of the lines between history and literature. “The creative tension between presentation and interpretation generates in autobiographical narrative the kind of complexity and ambiguity that we are used to remarking about in fiction” (Shapiro 434). The reader of the autobiography must distinguish between the author and his character. The writer, through the implementation of language itself, and all the constraints that carries, creates distance between the reader and the subject matter.<sup>17</sup> The distinction between the creator and the subject of an autobiographer is called the author’s *masque*. To understand the implementation of a masque is to understand that the author does not necessarily agree with all that his/her alter ego says or does.

This masque increases for the audience the believability of the central figure and thus strengthens the autobiography’s myth building:

Autobiography has always been an act of self-creation . . . [and] attempts to reconcile the opposing agendas of “I the narrator” and “I the subject” are seldom successful as the necessity for positive self-representation trumps all other concerns . . . [It is] shameless self-promotion. (Neary)

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feelings, secrets, frustrations—essentially the private world. The memoir was more on the order of chronicle, relating the individual’s role upon the stage of history . . . [the] autobiography . . . emerged as a term to include both confession and memoir . . . [and appeared] just after the age of revolution when the modern self was being liberated as well as defined” (Cox 255-256). “Franklin’s act of conceiving, discovering, or inventing himself almost exactly coincides with the birth of America” (Cox 258). “Franklin’s story is the story of . . . the birth of America—an America . . . [he] discovered in himself, then helped create in the world at large” (Brands 8).

<sup>17</sup> “The secret of Franklin’s amazing capacity for assimilating experience without being warped or discolored by it is . . . to take life with infinite zest and yet with humorous detachment” (Becker 6:597).

The autobiography is, at face value, a self-serving quest, in which the author seeks an idealized self, but its reach and application is much greater. The autobiography is a self-portrait, the artist-model alternating as poser and painter, and yielding a work that is both thorough yet superficial (Howarth 364). This “process is alternately reductive and expansive; it imparts to a single picture the force of universal implications” (Howarth 364). Therefore, the ramifications of the genre extend far beyond just an act of self-revelation. “The value of the autobiographical tradition, its relevance to our lives, lies in its capacity to furnish us with models and mirrors that can help us to accept, celebrate, and transform our lives as individuals and as participants (Shapiro 421). The autobiography’s “theme is personal but also representative of an era” (Howarth 366). In other words, self-portraits can also “preach an ideology” (Howarth 368).<sup>18</sup>

The connection between national identity and autobiographies is particularly significant in the development of the American identity. Beginning with the diaries of early explorers and settlers, as well as Indian captivity narratives, “American autobiographers have generally connected their own lives to the national life or to national ideas” (Sayre 149). Robert Sayre feels, since the United States of America is basically an idea, that the American autobiographical hero/author, from William Bradford to John Adams, from Walt Whitman to Frederick Douglass, and even F. Scott Fitzgerald, has always sought to be a representative of those ideas and an architect of the national character. He also believes that, although this American character has

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<sup>18</sup> Similar observations about American myth and shared experiences, the autobiography as both self-scrutiny and cultural analysis, the creation of a symbolic identity which does not attempt to communicate raw experience but rather demonstrate assumed societal values by transforming the act of recollection into an act of creation, are made by William Spengemann and L. R. Lundquist in “Autobiography and the American Myth” (501-2).

progressed and changed with time, the autobiography has played an essential role in presenting this national identity (150-6).

In British colonial America, or in the young United States, indeed in any shifting society, cultural myths either rise and fall or at least must be very malleable. Spengemann and Lundquist agree with Sayre that national identity changes, but they believe that these changes take place in a value system that does little changing (503). “Dissidence and competition do not deny the existence or power of a cultural myth; on the contrary, they serve to define it” (Spengemann and Lundquist 503). Spengemann and Lundquist further postulate that there are two types of autobiographers, those that “forecast the collective destiny” and those that follow or exemplify the path dictated by the myth (509). Franklin has been described both ways by different critics. “The autobiography serves . . . to articulate the experience of transformation and so make sense of it” (Spengemann and Lundquist 509).

The creation of, and attempt to modify, cultural and national identity is essential to both *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* and *Sergeant York*. The biography “appeals to us because they tap into cultural myths” (Bingham, “Lives and Times” 253). Autobiographers help “to create the national character and to define the methods and purposes of the builders . . . Autobiographers are both the emulators and the emulated” (Sayre 156). Attributing authorial intent in a more modern event, such as *Sergeant York*, due to studio memos and other metatexts, is somewhat easier than with an eighteenth-century written text, especially when the author employs the then common literary technique of masque. To understand Franklin’s use of masque, and to begin evaluating for propagandic purpose, we must understand the times in

which lived the man of whom it was said, “He seized the lightning from Heaven and the Scepter from the Tyrants.”<sup>19</sup>

### **Franklin’s World**

The roots of much of what distinguishes the nation can be found in Franklin. (Isaacson 492)

It is easy to see from the raw material of Benjamin Franklin’s life not just all the elements of his *Autobiography* but the groundwork for the later Horatio Alger myth. “Franklin’s purpose was to portray himself as an example of the American Dream” (Lemay, “Franklin” 201). As a multitude of volumes have been written concerning this most accomplished of the founding fathers, it seems grossly inadequate to summarize his life in a paragraph. Born in 1706, the son of an immigrant father and the eighth of seventeen children, his early life is one that attained a great deal of success in the printing trade, but became renown for scientific experimentation and international diplomacy. His historical reputation as “the First American” is in no small way due to his contributions to the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution. However, his *Autobiography*, which conspicuously omits mention of the Revolution, has played no less of a role in the creation and crystallizing of both his own identity and that of the nation. In Franklin’s work, “the history of the revolution . . . is displaced by the narrative of Franklin’s early life, so that Franklin’s personal history stands in place of the revolution . . . the form which would realize the revolution and thus stand for it . . . was the autobiography” (Cox 259). Literature did not yet have the term autobiography; it was being invented. So too, the concept of America as a nation was being invented.

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<sup>19</sup> “Eripuit Coelo fulmen, mox Sceptra Tyrannis.” Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot, as quoted in *The Monthly Anthology, and Boston Review* (1811), but its origins must be much earlier as it appears as an inscription on a bust of Franklin in 1778.



The omission of Franklin's revolutionary activities in the *Autobiography*, along with the historical Franklin's developing, but cloaked nationalism, obscure Franklin's conversion to the cause of independence. Early on, as with many colonists, Franklin saw himself as British. He seems to have changed during the time he served in London, 1774-75. "Franklin had thought that Britain could be his home; now he realized his only home was America" (Brands 7). The condescension towards the colonies, which he experienced in England, led him to believe that the colonists "must be Americans, for they could not be Britons" (Brands 7). Franklin's idea of himself as representative of the New World identity is exemplified in his self-mythologizing 1751 letter to the *Gazette* which he signed "Americanus." "Through this letter . . . Franklin began his own conscious development of a nationalistic identity that was distinctly American" (White 124).

While Franklin was certainly a patriot, he was also a man who was very careful about public statements. Franklin "avoided arguments wherever possible; when important public issues hinged on others' being convinced of their errors, he often argued anonymously" (Brands 3). For example, it is interesting that Lemay believes that no one, prior to the Stamp Act of 1765, furnished more patriotic propaganda than Franklin (*Canon* 133), yet the letters that Franklin contributed to the *New-England Courant* were under the alias Silence Dogood. Similarly, in a 1759 letter in the *New American Magazine*,<sup>20</sup> Franklin makes a masterful expression of the American identity, but signs the letter, "a New-Englandman" (*Canon* 134). The issue of Franklin's reticence and forbearance in patriotic sentiments does not have to be left to the evaluation of secondary sources. In a 1778 letter to his cousin Samuel Adams, John

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<sup>20</sup> *The New American Magazine*, 21 Sept. 1759, pp. 4-10.

Adams says of Franklin that he “hates to offend and seldom gives any opinion till obliged to do it . . . although he has as determined a soul as any man, yet it is his constant policy never to say yes or no decidedly but when he cannot avoid it” (*Papers* 256).

Indeed, Franklin’s subtle, yet persuasive, talents were ideally suited for convincing colonists that they were Americans. Franklin’s public writings of the mid-eighteenth century took place

at the same time America was undergoing a struggle for identity, aroused to self-examination by challenges to its isolation and autonomy . . . [and] Franklin was never simply an observer of national character. From the first, he was conscious in varying ways of being its creator. Franklin’s problem of developing and asserting a certain kind of identity can also be seen as a problem in finding or creating an audience. (Seavey 102)

If Franklin were to depict the American character, his audience must first think of themselves as Americans.

This “propaganda” needed to be two-fold: the long-standing identity as British that inhabitants of North America had must be overcome, but, even more difficult, was the fact that their current sense of identity was strongly tied to their particular colony. The idea that a New-Englander and a Virginian shared any common cultural identity was an extremely foreign concept at the time. Of course, Patrick Henry’s 1774 proclamation to the First Continental Congress was a tremendous step in overcoming this obstacle: “The distinctions between Virginians, Pennsylvanians, New Yorkers and New Englanders are no more. I am not a Virginian, but an American” (Henry 1:222). Yet the Patriotic cause was never a unanimous view<sup>21</sup> and the establishing of a new national identity, a necessary component of declaring

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<sup>21</sup> Support for independence was probably never the third for, third against, and third not caring that has often been attributed to John Adams. His comment on “thirds” was actually describing the French Revolution. Still, modern historians have estimated that between 15 and 20 percent of colonists

independence, would be a difficult project. Alexander Ziegler documents this process through analysis of the newspapers in Charleston, South Carolina between 1750 and 1800 (347). “From 1750 to 1770, references to British identity consistently outnumbered references to American identity,” however, in 1775 references to American identity, for the first time, outnumbered references to British identity (353). Between the years 1750 and 1755, there was an increasing tendency to identify the colonies as “America” (359). In Ziegler’s opinion, “1775 appears to be the jumping off point for an emerging independent sense of American identity” (362). It should also be noted that 1775 is four years after Franklin completed Part I of his *Autobiography*.<sup>22</sup> Ziegler makes no specific connection between Franklin and the creation of the American identity. However, the language used in colonial newspapers seems to be more a record of an evolution rather than an incitement of it. As John Adams said in an 1815 letter to Thomas Jefferson, “The Revolution was in the minds of the people . . . years before a drop of blood was drawn at Lexington” (*Adams-Jefferson* 455).

Franklin’s ideal American was characterized by rugged individualism, intrepid and industrious, who could not help but succeed in a new world of unlimited opportunities. “It is this image of the hardworking self-made businessman that has most endured . . . the man who personifies the American dream – who stays with us” (G. Wood 246). To call such a persona a myth requires clarification. Many definitions of the term are a long list of characteristics, some of which fit the use of the term when applied to Franklin, while others do not. The definition

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remained loyalists even throughout the war, and that half of the population avoided taking any part in the conflict, and that only 40 to 45 percent actively supported the patriot cause (Calhoun 235).

<sup>22</sup> Becker sees the Coercive Acts (1774) as the turning point in Franklin’s despair of reconciliation (Becker 6:590).

often includes the idea of a traditional narrative, often of unknown origins, handed down often via oral tradition, and dealing with gods and legendary heroes. None of these elements are appropriate to Franklin's *Autobiography*, unless we see Franklin as a hero reaching legendary status. The definition also usually includes the idea that the story or stories explain a cultural essence and origin of a particular people. This does indeed apply to Franklin's literary efforts, for as Gordon Wood states, Franklin "created a powerful conception of American identity – the America of enterprising, innovative, and equality loving people" (242). However, the definition also often contains the idea that this testament is a fabrication, but as Charles White reminds us "the myth surrounding him [Franklin], like the myths surrounding other great men, had its beginning in fact" (5). To whatever degree the American myth is or is not based in reality is, as previously stated, irrelevant to determining whether or not it is propaganda. Similarly, whether Franklin believed in the actuality of his American persona or not, he certainly espoused it.<sup>23</sup>

Once committed to the patriot cause, Franklin set out to reinvent himself and the implement would be the *Autobiography*. Franklin the internationalist would become a homespun, colloquial, common and popular sage, who, from the position of agedness, could look back on a highly successful life and impart the wisdom of experience into a vacuum of

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<sup>23</sup> Franklin was, of course, not the first nor the only voice to promote rugged individualism. The "protestant work ethic" was an indispensable component of the earliest Puritan writings. Franklin, however, would take this Calvinist industry and secularize it into a new "faith," a political one. In addition, in 1782, situated between Franklin's writing of the first part of his *Autobiography* and the second part, J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur published a series of essays entitled the *Letters from an American Farmer*, in which he too explored the concept of "Americanness." In his third letter, "What Is an American?," he states: "Here are no aristocratical families . . . The rich and the poor are not so far removed from each other as they are in Europe . . . We are all animated with the spirit of an industry which is unfettered and unrestrained, because each person works for himself" (46-7). In so stating, Crevecoeur echoes the characteristics that the first Puritan settlers thought so essential to survival in the New World, but also suggests that Americans, by fleeing from oppression, and leaving behind their old ways of life, had created a new identity. "Here individuals of all nations are *meltd* into a new race of men" (52).

national identity. By idealizing himself, Franklin was also mythologizing the American experience and recommending the essence of the American character. Under the guise of relating his own experiences and the search for improved personal character, Franklin had created “a foundation myth . . . [which] achieved a kind of self-realization; Americans-in-waiting became fully fledged Americans . . . [and became] hardwired into American identity” (Kidd). It is also the image of Franklin found in the propagandistic pages of his *Autobiography*.

### **Franklin’s *Autobiography***

The autobiography is also a uniquely American book. After a life like Franklin’s had become possible and could be described matter-of-factly, the Declaration of Independence seems understandable and much less revolutionary. (Labaree 4)

There appears, at least at face value, to be a major change within Franklin’s *Autobiography* in authorial intent. Part I was written in 1771 in England, Part II in 1784 in France, and in America, Part III in 1788, and part IV in 1789-90. Franklin addresses Part I to his son William, but Louis Masur suggests that “he did so merely as a literary convention” (9).<sup>24</sup> While Steven Hamelman does not go as far as Masur in suggesting contrivance, he nonetheless speaks to a broader application beyond father-son advice:

Franklin, initially addressing the needs of his family, touches upon universal truths in his exemplary individualism and consequently achieves public relevance through what starts as a private correspondence. (129)

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<sup>24</sup> “Franklin wants to seem a doddering, fond, loquacious, and foolish old man—for literary purposes. The persona is part of the creation of a special relationship that will allow Franklin to be didactic and unresented, to be a sage, though a somewhat foolish and too human one. This persona is maintained, to some degree, throughout all four parts of the *Autobiography*. In order to achieve the special, privileged, informal tone, this particular relationship with the reader, Franklin began the *Autobiography* as a letter to his son . . . No person who takes into account the facts concerning Franklin can suppose for an instant that the *Autobiography* was actually begun as a letter to Franklin’s son. William Franklin was not the tender, inexperienced son for whom Franklin ostensibly wrote the *Autobiography* . . . The letter device is a brilliant literary ploy which allows Franklin to create an intimate relationship between the author and the reader” (Lemay, “Franklin” 200).

In fact, White believes that “the *Autobiography* is not intended in any meaningful way for his son . . . All the evidence suggests that the book was conceived as a public utterance” (8-9). Even within Part I, Franklin himself states:

Having emerg’d from the Poverty and Obscurity in which I was born and bred, to a State of Affluence and some Degree of Reputation in the World, and having gone so far thro’ Life with a considerable Share of Felicity, the conducting Means I made use of, which, with the Blessing of God, so well succeeded, my Posterity may like to know, as they may find some of them suitable to their own Situations, and therefore fit to be imitated. (67-8)

Moreover, when Franklin returned to the project in Part II, it is clear that “he intended his life story for a wider audience, the rising generation of independent Americans” (Chaplin xvii).

Indeed, a clear shift takes place between the writings of Part I and Part II, with Part II being more overtly moralistic,<sup>25</sup> and is attested to in two correspondences. The first reads, “All that has happened to you is also connected with the detail of the manners and situation of a rising people . . . Your life will give for the forming of future great men . . . [and] give a noble rule and example of self-education” (*Papers* 39:112-113).<sup>26</sup> The author of the letter, Franklin’s friend, Benjamin Vaughn saw that the instructive purpose of the *Autobiography* was meant for all, even if Franklin did not say so. In the second letter, upon admitting “the advantages of certain modes of conduct,” Franklin admits that on “reading over what is already done, that the book will be found entertaining, interesting and useful” (*Writings* 9:676).<sup>27</sup> Of these three characteristics, this chapter is most interested in *usefulness*.

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<sup>25</sup> Moralizing was always a part of Franklin’s prose. “In 1732, I first published my Almanac . . . *Poor Richard’s*. . . I endeavour’d to make it both entertaining and useful . . . scarce any Neighborhood in the Province being without it, I consider’d it as a proper Vehicle for conveying Instruction among the common People” (235-6).

<sup>26</sup>This letter from Benjamin Vaughan to Franklin is dated Jan. 31, 1783.

<sup>27</sup> From Franklin to Vaughn, Oct. 24, 1788.

If such improvement of personal character was always intended, then the affectation of a paternal sage is only a masque, and the ultimate goal of the *Autobiography* is not to produce a virtuous populace per se, except to the extent that Franklin sees virtue as intrinsic to the new national identity. “According to Franklin...virtues...are only in so far virtues as they are actually useful . . . mere appearance is always sufficient when it accomplishes the end in view” (Weber 52). Masur gives us a hint as to what this “end view” might be: “Success hinged on public identity, and Franklin’s *Autobiography* aimed to teach how to present an impeccable image to others . . . an ideology that helped make sense of the changing nation” (16). The ultimate goal then of the *Autobiography* is the creation of a new national identity, “a rising people.”

The trick for Franklin was to “toot his own horn” without seeming to do so. Part of this manifests itself in apparent dichotomies, such as Franklin’s emphasizing the uniqueness of his heritage, while at the same time claiming that anyone can achieve what he has. America, after all, is supposed to be that land where heritage means nothing. Franklin needed to be “unprecedented without being unrecognizable” (Braudy 392-3). The universality of the autobiography is that a single voice can also be the voice of the many (Shapiro 431).<sup>28</sup> Franklin “represent[s] the conclusions of his experience as being universally true and hence applicable to every life, rather than peculiar to his own case” (Spengemann, *Forms* 55).

Franklin’s literary persona facilitates this dichotomy. In biographies and autobiographies, the transformation of a historic figure into a literary figure creates a liminal

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<sup>28</sup> “Observing the diversity of the surrounding social world, he postulated a common essence, a human nature . . . Franklin’s self-representation continually emphasizes his inclination to detachment from complete immersion in the circumstances at hand . . . he aspires to representative personal universality” (Breitwieser 171).

space where dichotomy and contradiction thrive. “Most of us overlook the crucial distinction, especially in the first half of Franklin’s *Autobiography*, between the *writer* of the book and the chief *character* he portrays” (Levin 259). The central character of the *Autobiography* “personified the peculiar genius of America” (Conn 1). What makes Franklin’s rags-to-riches tale so compelling is that the events are so ordinary that we all become convinced that it is “perfectly natural to be Benjamin Franklin: anyone else at a later date can do it too” (Seavey 9).

Franklin’s literary persona is an artifice with a distinct national purpose. Masur summarizes the elements of this character: “Self-education, self-improvement, self-discipline—here were the constituent parts of the self-made man” (16). This self-man was no longer an Englishman; he was the new American identity:

Humble beginnings . . . industry, independence, and innovativeness are far more important indicators of self-worth than inherited wealth or hereditary privilege. Those are of course precisely the values that have been most championed as distinctly ‘American.’ (Beeman 147)

Franklin himself admits to holding back on “telling all,” or manipulating reality. “To shorten the work, as well as for other reasons, I omit all facts and transactions, that may not have a tendency to benefit the young reader, by showing him from my example” (*Writings* 9:675).<sup>29</sup> The biggest omission is the Revolutionary War; indeed, the storyline of the *Autobiography* ends in 1758. The new nationality is not simply the result of declaring a new government. On the contrary, for Franklin, the latter is the necessary ramification of the former. “Franklin’s art is deceptive. At first there may seem to be none at all” (Levin 261). This is how the masque functions.

The veil is a perfect technique for a man whose rhetorical style emphasizes subtlety. This approach is explained by Franklin himself in the *Autobiography*:

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<sup>29</sup> From Franklin to Vaughn, Oct. 24, 1788.



Retaining only the Habit of expressing myself in Terms of modest Diffidence, never using when I advance any thing that may possibly be disputed, the Words, *certainly*, *undoubtedly*, or any others that give the Air of Positiveness to an Opinion . . . This habit I believe has been of great Advantage to me, when I have occasion to inculcate my Opinions and persuade Men into Measures that I have been from time to time engag'd n promoting . . . the chief Ends of Conversation are to *inform*, or to be *informed*, to *please* or to *persuade*, I wish well-meaning sensible Men would not lessen their Power of doing Good by a Positive assuming Manner that seldom fails to disgust, tends to create Opposition, and to defeat every one of those Purposes for which Speech was given us. (100)

In this regard, Franklin balances narrative with philosophy and creates a duality in which Franklin's persona is "both agent and object" (England 426).

While the veil or masque allows Franklin to hide his intentions, it also creates dichotomies, which Franklin must balance, in order to give the *Autobiography* its believability upon which its persuasive force rests. For instance, his character insists that hard work has created his success, yet his opportunities also arise out of the fact that people just seem to like him. Franklin must also, as mentioned earlier, strike a balance between humility and arrogance. "It is to Franklin's credit that the style of his book does not always give the impression that the author maintains an imperturbable, god-like ascendancy over the confusion he encounters" (England 429).

The glue that binds together all the contradictions and dichotomies of the Franklin persona, and upon which he most relies for connection with his reader, is humor. Franklin was supposedly not chosen to write the Declaration because he would have hidden jokes in it (Becker 6:597). Franklin, despite being a child of the Enlightenment,<sup>30</sup> even jests at the importance of

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<sup>30</sup> A child of the Enlightenment "not indeed of the school of Rousseau, but of Defoe and Pope and Swift . . . he spoke their language, although with a homely accent, a tang of the soil, that bears witness to his lowly and provincial origin. His wit and humor . . . were all the more effective and humane for their dash of genial and kindly cynicism" (Becker 6:596). In fact, "It was the public show of his adoption of the Enlightenment's principles that moved him into the realm of myth" (White 89).

reason. “So convenient a thing it is to be a *reasonable creature*, since it enables one to find or make a reason for everything one has a mind to do” (*Autobiography* 128-29). Franklin also makes light of his purported mission to engender virtue:

I conceived the bold and arduous project of arriving at moral perfection . . . As I knew, or thought I knew, what was right and wrong...But I soon found I had undertaken a task of more difficulty than I had imagined. While my attention was taken up and care employed against one fault, I was often surprised by another. (*Autobiography* 213-14)

Humor in the *Autobiography* is also the bridge between the dichotomies of humility and vanity.

“Most People dislike Vanity in others whatever Share they have of it themselves, but I give it fair Quarter” (*Autobiography* 68-9). It is Franklin’s self-effacement that makes his moralizing more palatable.

Another crucial aspect to the Franklin’s American persona is his approach to religion. Raised at the end of Puritan influence in New England, Franklin’s simplified Deism exemplified New England’s turn to Unitarianism. Franklin altered the Puritan ethos from, being God-like means doing what is right, to, doing what is right means to be God-like. In a secularized religion, rewards could be earthly and all traditional faiths could partake. “He translated the authoritative rhetoric of moral-utilitarianism into an ethical duty subscribed to by all citizens of a growing republic” (Schueller 105). However, although in Franklin’s new national identity, becoming American required a new view of religion, this did not mean that Franklin abandoning Christian tradition.<sup>31</sup> On the contrary, in the *Autobiography*, he uses Scriptures to defend his call to financial success: “Seest thou a man diligent in his business? He shall stand before kings” (Prov. xxii. 29).

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<sup>31</sup> See also p. 134, n. 23.

Franklin's prose style<sup>32</sup> also exhibits his connection to the Age of Reason, an attribute which, at least for a time, would contribute to the new national identity. In Peter Conn's estimation, Franklin's "chief legacy to American letters is the strong, lucid prose in which the *Autobiography* is written, a prose stripped of excess ornament" (4). In keeping with other Augustan writers, Franklin's style is often disjointed, didactic, and unadornedly prosaic, but also incorporates wry witticisms, anecdotal cul-de-sacs, and an emphasis on rhetoric rather than overly poetic language. This is the neo-classical language of the Declaration of Independence. However, as Matthiessen points out, the language of the young Republic was to become Romanticism. John Lynen, however, suggests that Franklin's style actually represents the transition to Romanticism:

Franklin . . . assume[s] that there is a true meaning, though we only get views of it. This meaning is 'there', in the symbol, and at one with it, rather than merely a meaning projected upon the symbol by the observer of the moment. (195)<sup>33</sup>

Franklin's *Autobiography* stands at a shift in its genre, much the same as the biopic stood at the brink of genre change at the time of *Sergeant York*.<sup>34</sup>

The various ways in which the *Autobiography* may be viewed bears witness to the adaptability of Franklin's text and thus its enduring worth. In fact, it can be argued that, "In his

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<sup>32</sup> "Franklin's prose style [simple, unadorned, yet reflective, humorous and sly] probably did more to create a distinctively American English than the prose of any other single person" (Lemay, "Franklin" 196).

<sup>33</sup> "Insofar as Romanticism may be said to be identified with individualism . . . the *Autobiography* is one of the greatest Romantic books in literature" (Lemay, "Franklin" 201-202). "Besides adding an element of pathos, the interpolations . . . stress a developing emotional maturity . . . this double vision seems too sophisticated for a mere and hasty memoir . . . interpolations point to novelistic devices that help support development of character" (Zall 60). His *Autobiography* is a "union of head, heart, and conscience" (Zall 65).

<sup>34</sup> See p. 124, n. 11.

*Autobiography* Franklin employs writing as a technological medium that lets him ‘intend’ his past as a representative, revisable text” (Renza 282). Malleability and adaptability then are an essential component of Franklin’s ideal new community. The structure of the original text left ample space for added comments and afterthoughts. “This invitation to interpolation led to the disruption of logical continuity that some readers find disturbing” (Zall 55). This is clear from Franklin’s unapologetic approach to his flaws.

I was surpris’d to find myself so much fuller of Faults than I had imagined . . . To avoid the Trouble of renewing now and then my little Book . . . scraping out the Marks on the Paper of old Faults to make room for new ones. (*Autobiography* 223)

Franklin uses the printer’s term *errata* to describe his faults—the term being much less catastrophic than *sin*. In so doing, Franklin combines his new more secular faith, presumably a more forgiving one than the Puritans, with his humorous and affectatiously humble approach to his transgressions. Furthermore, correctability would become a political cornerstone as well. As one of the designers of the Constitution, Franklin’s view of errata would be intrinsic to the guidelines for the new government by making it amendable.

The interpretation of Franklin’s authorial intent as a desire to create or at least confirm a new nationality for a new nation is not a unique viewpoint. David Larson sees the *Autobiography* as “examining the question of what it means to be an American and what the dominant American values are . . . [and as] an attempt to create a unified American identity.” Jeff Osborne believes, “Franklin situated himself as a unifying fantasy for a public experiencing the instabilities of radical social transformation” (28). David Levin also makes the connection between the *Autobiography* and its effect: “He not only creates an attractive image of himself but uses himself as a prototype of his age and his country” (261).

There are those voices that do not view Franklin's work less favorably. Some criticism finds fault in the unabashed Capitalistic manifesto that the *Autobiography* appears to be. Max Weber sees Franklin's materialism as promoting a profit-only philosophy and acknowledges such as a purposeful effort, "the spread of such a uniformly held belief set" (55). Weber sees Franklin as preaching "the supposed confession of faith of the Yankee" (51). This means that even those who question the value of Franklin's efforts confirm that he is definitely seeking to persuade—a deliberate rhetorical crafting of something larger than just his own self-promotion. The most antagonistic analysis of Franklin's *Autobiography* undoubtedly comes from D. H. Lawrence. "The ideal man! . . . Benjamin Franklin?" (15), "He set up the first dummy American" (16), "Why the soul of man is a vast forest, and all Benjamin intended was a neat back garden. And we've all got to fit into his kitchen garden scheme of things. Hail Columbia!" (17), "I'm not going to be turned into a virtuous little automaton as Benjamin would have me" (22). Lawrence attributes to Franklin the rather Puritanical aim of forcing "sameness" on all members of a community, but good or bad, it is unquestionably community building:

Benjamin . . . knew that the breaking of the old world was a long process . . . He wanted to be American . . . It is a gradual shedding . . . Like a son escaping from the domination of his parents . . . It is along and half-secret process. So with the American . . . You can never have a new thing without breaking an old. Europe happens to be the old thing. America . . . should be the new thing . . . And Benjamin worked for this both directly and indirectly. (Lawrence 26-7)

While Lawrence deplores what he sees as holier-than-thou moralizing, he nonetheless backs up the idea that Franklin's artifice was designed to tear down one national identity and build a new one.

### **The Battle for York – Changing Identity**

In a sense . . . all Hollywood films . . . are about American national identity. . . deployed for both internal consumption and global export. (Epstein 2)

In the United States, during the years between World War I and II, the image of national identity, as created by Benjamin Franklin, found a fitting home. As White writes, “In 1939, while America hesitated about joining the war in Europe, pacifists quoted Franklin’s celebrated remark to Bishop Shipley: ‘There has never been or ever will be any such thing as a good war or a bad peace’” (338-9). This might seem counter intuitive when we think of Franklin the international diplomat, but his idea that nation and community rested with the virtue and the industrious efforts of the individual fits nicely in a national philosophy of isolationism.

Just as Franklin influenced national identity, so too did American movies, and the biopic particularly, greatly contribute to the nation’s sense of itself. Even Soviet filmmaker Eisenstein recognized the connection between the biopic and national identity when he praised *Young Mr. Lincoln* (1939) as a film he wished he had made and described as “a womb of popular and national spirit” (*Essays* 141). In a description similar to the ones we have seen concerning Franklin and his *Autobiography*, Eisenstein sees the film and its central character, Lincoln, “as not only a bearer but a living embodiment of the positive ideals of freedom and justice for future generations of America” (*Essays* 144). It would be difficult therefore to disassociate the ability to build or change national identity from a deliberate intent to do so. In fact, R. Barton Palmer opines that “biopics during the studio era were intended to make their viewers better citizens” (130).

However, there were those who saw the impending disaster of totalitarianism as a danger not just for Europe but for the whole world and their voices had to be careful and subtle. Like

Franklin, with his discrete attempts to change public attitude, their efforts to persuade would require great stealth. Among those who advocated more international involvement were the top executives of Warner Bros. studio. As Todd Bennett suggests, “Widely known as ‘the Roosevelt studio,’ Warner Bros. supported the administration’s foreign and domestic policies more openly than any other firm” (76). Warner Bros. had ceased doing business with Nazi Germany as early as 1934; however, they stood alone in this effort. Hollywood received between 30 and 40% of its income from overseas markets<sup>35</sup> and international film distribution was not a channel they wished to interrupt. The major studios were also afraid that the government could break up, as it eventually would, their monopolies of production, distribution and exhibition. Furthermore, the studio heads, many of whom were Jewish immigrants, did not wish their audiences reminded of this fact. At a time when most Americans were isolationists and suspect of anyone with interventionist sympathies, the last thing the studio heads wanted was to be seen as trying to drag America into war strictly because of their Jewish heritage.

Hollywood’s efforts to change America’s concept of itself as isolationist would be gradual. Even for the self-professed social conscience of Hollywood, Warner Bros., the first overtly anti-Nazi film, *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*, was not released until 1939. That year can be seen as culmination of the struggle between isolationist and interventionist viewpoints in America after the invasion of Poland, followed in 1940 with the fall of France, and the Battle of Britain. Although it was widely known how President Roosevelt felt about the struggle in Europe, his administration had to, at least superficially, maintain the appearance of the official

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<sup>35</sup> In a 2010 article, John Sedgewick and Mike Pokorny place this figure between 28% and 38% (86). Thomas Schatz, in citing *The Wall Street Journal* of October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1939, claims 30 to 35 percent of Hollywood income as coming from abroad (*Boom* 22).

U.S. policy of neutrality. However, the desperate situation in which Great Britain found herself emboldened the FDR Administration to concoct Lend-Lease and other measures for escalating their support of the last power standing against fascism. The dire nature of international events also emboldened Warner Bros., and now even other studios, to inject current social political upheaval, and the concept of the forces of light versus the forces of darkness, into their productions. Despite this, in 1941, 79% of Americans still had no desire for direct U.S. military involvement in the Second World War (Gallup 1:290) and although the executive branch may have been favorable to intervention, certain members of Congress were still adamant in their isolationism. As a result, Senators Gerald P. Nye and Joel Bennett Clark opened congressional hearings into, what they saw as, Hollywood's ever-increasing attempt to pull America into the conflict. In response, Hollywood executives continued to insist that their films were entertainment not propaganda. Nonetheless, the Nye-Clark committee accused eight specific movies<sup>36</sup> of warmongering and, more importantly, violating the Neutrality Act. One of the eight films was *Sergeant York*.

The evolution of Alvin C. York, as a public and mythic figure, a transformation that took him from isolationist to interventionist, is the work of Jesse Lasky and Harry Warner.<sup>37</sup> It is also an event that epitomizes the gradual change in public sentiments toward intervention throughout the 1930s. In his review of the film *Sergeant York*, Bosley Crowther notes that at a time when

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<sup>36</sup> The eight films were *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* (1939), *The Great Dictator* (1940), *Dive Bomber* (1940), *Flight Command* (1940), *Escape* (1940), *That Hamilton Woman* (1941), *Underground* (1941), and *Sergeant York* (1941).

<sup>37</sup> See Birdwell *Celluloid*, p. 2. In addition, the story of the wooing of Alvin York by Hollywood and the development of the film *Sergeant York* is related in detail in Birdwell's *Celluloid* chapter entitled "A Change of Heart," pp. 87-130.



people are gravely concerned over another World War, Warner Bros. looks positively back at a hero of the last World War. “The picture has all the flavor of true Americana, the blunt and homely humor of backwoodsmen and the raw integrity peculiar to simple folk” (Crowther).

York was the most highly decorated U.S. military figure in the First World War, but to become so, he had to overcome his deep religious objections to war. After the war, York made it plain that he would not attempt to profit from his military achievements. It may have been necessary killing, but it was still killing—done, in York’s mind, for his country not for money.

Independent producer Jesse Lasky had wanted to purchase the rights to York’s story as early as 1919. However, York rejected all offers to make a film of his life, and his primary goal after the war was to increase the quality of education in his home state of Tennessee. As such, he resembles Franklin who also saw education as a central component to the character of the ideal American. There is also a similarity in that while York did not wish to profit from his wartime heroics, he seems to have had no qualms about using his war experiences and fame to advance his agenda for Tennessee. Therefore, like Franklin, while professing humble goals, York was also happy to exploit his heroic persona, if the objective was a worthy one. As indeed most Americans did after the war, York began to question the value of his military contributions and became a very outspoken proponent of isolationism. In order to acquire the rights to York’s story, Lasky first had to overcome York’s now strongly held, isolationist feelings.

Lasky would also have to overcome other major hesitations on the part of York.<sup>38</sup> His religious convictions were such that York believed movies were evil. He had to be made comfortable with Hollywood and with working with Jewish people. In 1940, Lasky journeyed to

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<sup>38</sup> See note 39. Birdwell’s *Celluloid* pp. 87-130.

Tennessee to persuade York to agree to a contract. Eventually, after several meetings with York and his friends and relatives, Lasky obtained York's signature to the project. York's comfort level increased after meeting with the head of Warner Bros. studio, Harry Warner. While Warner was of a faith that was very foreign to York, York soon recognized that, like himself, Warner was a man of deep serious religious conviction. Warner was also able to convince York that the threat to the Jews of Europe was a threat to the freedom of religion everywhere. York had, however, made several demands, one was that whoever played his wife in the story would not be a "fallen" woman, as he perceived most Hollywood actresses to be, and that his part would be played by Gary Cooper.<sup>39</sup> The stature of Cooper as a heroic screen figure suggests that York, just like Franklin, despite any professed humility, actually had a fairly exalted opinion of his own persona. These two requests were met by Lasky and Warner, but York also insisted that his story be strictly about his life after the war and his efforts to improve education. York refused to let his life story be just another war movie. Lasky and Warner agreed at first, but as the project progressed, the script changed considerably. The moguls convinced York that the Nazis were a grave danger to all religious people and that once again reticence to military action might need to be overcome in the name of patriotism and freedom. The first two writers, Harry Chandler and Abem Finkel, were dismayed at the alterations in the screenplay since they wished to accommodate York's original desires. However, Lasky and Warner knew the propagandist value of this source material and the striking similarity between the film's reluctant warrior and the way they saw the American public—both York and the public required a change of heart.

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<sup>39</sup> How York, who disdained the movies, was so familiar with Cooper's screen persona is a bit paradoxical.

Accordingly, two additional writers, John Huston and Howard Koch,<sup>40</sup> were brought in, as well as the renowned director Howard Hawks who, in addition to comedies, was best known for action and adventure.

Due to, or in spite of, Hawks' influence,<sup>41</sup> *Sergeant York* would assume a strategic place in film and political history. Eventually, York not only signed on to the changes made in the script but also became an outspoken public champion for intervention.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, at the premiere, York "expressed the wish that the film would contribute to 'national unity in this hour of danger,' adding that 'millions of Americans, like myself, must be facing the same questions, the same uncertainties which we faced and I believe resolved for the right some twenty-four years ago'" (Crowther). Isolationism, however, was still the overwhelming public opinion at the time of the release of *Sergeant York* and Crowther said of the film that "the suggestion of deliberate propaganda is readily detected." The film premiered in July of 1941 but was soon pulled from distribution due to the Congressional pressure by the Nye-Clark committee. When face to face with the committee, Warner said:

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<sup>40</sup> In the final film, all four writers would receive screen credit.

<sup>41</sup> It is difficult to see *Sergeant York* as a Hawks' film. Nowhere are the typical identifiers of his style: the "Hawksian group," a close-knit male collective, or the "Hawksian woman," the modern independent female who must prove herself worthy of entrance into the exclusive male club, or, most of all, missing is the intergender fireworks that arise between these two entities. Most of all, Robin Wood tells us that in a Hawks's film, "there is no sense that the men are being formed by values sanctioned by an accumulated tradition" (84). In contrast to typical Hawks, the appeal made in *Sergeant York* is strongly based in tradition. In addition, when it comes to *Sergeant York*, Gerald Mast believes it is "as if Hawks was working in a style [the biopic] . . . that was a bit foreign to him" (357). Hawks was very uncomfortable with the genre's "pious seriousness" (Mast 16). The biopic, with its professed emphasis on capturing reality, would have been anathema to Hawks.

<sup>42</sup> This brought York into direct and public conflict with another larger-than-life, American hero, Charles Lindbergh, who at the very least was an isolationist and at most was a Nazi sympathizer.

*Sergeant York* is a factual portrayal of the life of one of the great heroes of the last war. If that was propaganda, we plead guilty . . . So it is with each and every one of our pictures dealing with the world situation or with the national defense. These pictures were carefully prepared on the basis of factual happenings and they were not twisted to serve any ulterior purpose. In truth the only sin Warner Bros. is guilty of is that of accurately recording on the screen the world as it is or as it has been. (*Propaganda* 339)

This committee hearing, however, would become moot after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. The Congressional hearings faded away, *Sergeant York* was re-released, and it became the top grossing box-office film for 1942.<sup>43</sup>

### ***Sergeant York* (1941)**

For millions of Americans, York was the incarnation of their romanticized understanding of the nation's past when men and women supposedly lived plainer, sterner, and more virtuous lives. (Lee x)

In the biopic of his life, Alvin C. York is a rural Tennessee farmer who works hard and drinks hard. The wild and reckless behavior of York and his friends is the bane of York's mother (Margaret Wycherly). The first catalyst for a change in York is when he meets, and falls for, Gracie (Joan Leslie), who becomes the impetus for his desire to "make good." York, in a desire to make himself worthy of Gracie, commits himself to buying some bottomland.<sup>44</sup> Displaying an attribute that will play a key role in his military exploits, York wins a shooting contest and the necessary cash, but the owner has already sold the land to someone else. An irate

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<sup>43</sup> While the averted accusation of propaganda seemed a victory for Hollywood, the Nye-Clark committee also led to the reopening of the issue of distribution monopoly in the film industry. The result was the 1948 *U.S. v. Paramount* decision which forced the studios to divest themselves of their theatre chains—one of the major contributions to the end of the classic Hollywood era.

<sup>44</sup> One of the few places where Robin Wood sees Hawks' touch in *Sergeant York* is in the attempt to obtain "bottom land." York's setting himself a task and the achieving of it as a matter of self-respect "reveals the essential quality of the Hawks hero" (159). When he fails, Gracie tells him that it does not matter and York says solemnly, "It do to me."

York sets out with his rifle to commit murder. On the way, York and his horse are struck by lightning and his gun is destroyed. He staggers to the local meetinghouse, where he proclaims his religious conversion. All seems well until the long shadow of the Great War reaches even this simple and sleepy Tennessee Valley. York is drafted, but his new faith leads him to apply for conscientious objection, a request that is denied. His quandary between religion and patriotism, between faith and duty, is the second critical point in his life. With the guidance of his commanding officer (Stanley Ridges) and a book on American history, York is eventually convinced that he can be true to both his god and his country.<sup>45</sup> When York eventually finds himself in battle, he exhibits, through a combination of marksmanship, ingenuity, and even, supposedly, a desire to save lives, great heroism and captures many enemy soldiers, taking key machinegun emplacements in the process. When he returns to Tennessee, he and Gracie settle down to a quiet and god-fearing life. As is inherent in biographical persona, the York of the screen is more symbol than fact. Nonetheless, the public embraced the film once America entered the Second World War, the film became a rallying point for patriotic justification for the nation's war effort.

The propagandist intention of the film is apparent from the opening sequence. The townsfolk are singing at the meetinghouse where a service is conducted by the Pastor Rosier Pile (Walter Brennan). The meeting, however, is disrupted by the sound of shooting outside – the drunken, rambunctious behavior of York and his buddies. The members of the congregation,

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<sup>45</sup> This "convincing" by York's commanding officer on screen mirrors Lasky and Warner's efforts to persuade York to see the value to Americans of his war story. Furthermore, the persuasion of a pacifist to war hero, held great symbolic value for Warner Bros. in their efforts to convert the national identity from isolationists to interventionists.

just like the American public, attempt to live their lives, embracing their simple, faith-filled, yet insulated existence, and, at first, attempt to ignore the gunfire outside. Eventually, however, their values cannot ignore the upheaval beyond their walls. The hymn cannot compete with the ruckus outside and the meeting breaks up.

A further, and more blatant, depiction of isolationism occurs in the general store, where the locals gather around to hear a reading from a newspaper, which has just arrived by mail. One man (Howard Da Silva)<sup>46</sup> opens the paper and begins to read a story about some local politician, completely ignoring the headlines on the front page – “Germans Smash at Verdun.” The locals take no note of the significant headline but an intrusive and ominous burst of music accompanies the revelation of the headline to the camera. The implication is that danger was present, but not realized, in the story, and the same danger exists in 1940 and that Americans cannot once again act as “ostriches with their head in the sand.” It is further underlined by dialogue between the locals and a travelling peddler. The peddler says, “I’d sure like to sell you some of these before the price goes up on account of the war,” and an old local responds, “What war?”

The implication that Americans are unaware of what is important, that they are too wrapped up in themselves is echoed when Mother York defends her son’s rambunctious behavior by saying that “Alvin works hard.” The pre-converted York has a life made up of hard work and hard play, echoing the wildness of the twenties and the harsh reality of the thirties in the United States. These are the two characteristics of the filmic York prior to his conversion and the producers obviously wanted to assure those they wished to persuade that America’s

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<sup>46</sup> Da Silva was later excluded by the Hollywood blacklist. In a bit of irony, the actor who had come under suspicion of “un-American” activity, would return to film in 1972 by portraying one of the greatest of the founding fathers, Benjamin Franklin, in the film version of the highly successful Broadway musical *1776*, reprising his stage roll.

feeling of entitlement to isolationism was completely understandable. Hard times, in the public's mind, were an excuse for isolationist ignorance. Interventionism would have to convert without ignoring or denying this sentiment—a delicate persuasion not unlike Franklin's efforts.

The ignorance that Harry Warner believed Americans had toward the global situation is also visually expressed in the state-line saloon, in which York does his drinking. The patrons walk back and forth across a line painted on the floor delineating Kentucky from Tennessee, oblivious to such parameters just as the rest of the world was tearing itself apart over such boundaries—both at the time of the film's plot and at the time of the film's production. Yet the drunken fighting in the barroom, strongly suggests that America's indifference to the world's belligerency is not due to any inherent aversion to fighting on the part of the American identity. Yet the film does not suggest that isolationism is in any way cowardice. Warner Bros., like Franklin, knew the key to persuasion lay in not offending.

The film's use of music juxtaposes religious music with patriotic music, expressing both sides of York's dilemma and, furthermore, the nation's isolationist/ interventionist quandary. Even more pertinent than the blending of religious and patriotic music, is the reoccurring theme music that the film employs. It is soaring in nature, but neither religious nor patriotic. It expresses quiet nobility that fits the depiction of the simple man's integrity.

This careful blending of religion, nationalism and individualism is also apparent in one specific scene. York's pastor is attempting to get him to change his rowdy ways. The film does not overplay the religiosity of York's actual character, lest audiences dismiss him as a religious fanatic. The pastor points out that a tree cannot stand "without a lot of deep roots holding it up." While certainly the pastor considers religion as the essence of "roots," he also broadens the

appeal so others can agree as well. In what is certainly an admonition to isolationists, the pastor continues, “a fella’s gotta have his roots in something outside of his own self.” However, in their attempt to convert their fellow citizens, and not make York’s wartime heroics simply the result of a religious conversion, the producers and writers transform the pastor’s attempts at persuasion from strictly religious to words that sound more like Humanism, as the pastor says to York, “It ain’t just about praying.” Just as Franklin was careful not to trespass too heavily on traditional faith, while still calling for a different view of religion, so too does *Sergeant York*.

The film also deals with, although more subtly than Franklin’s *Autobiography*, the concept of the self-made man. *Sergeant York*, however, suggests that the notion that hard work makes anything possible, is not, as the Depression had proved, axiomatic. It was no longer enough for an American to be Franklin’s self-made man; the work ethic could be thwarted by the greed and mismanagement of the few. Just as Americans in the Great Depression had lost their birthright to the rewards of hard work, so too does York lose the land he had worked so hard for to the whim of the property owner. When York takes note of the irony that “folks at the bottom look down their nose at the folks at the top,” the film is acknowledging the waywardness of the American dream. The suggestion is that those who work the hardest are truly the people of value—or at least should be. The film sympathizes with the understandable self-interest of hard-working Americans, but at the same time, suggests that the original myth of American identity might require, due to the failure of unchecked capitalism, some tweaking—such sentiment was, after all, at the heart of the New Deal. Warner Bros. and others demonstrated that the New Deal and European intervention have a connection, if in no other way than in FDR’s new vision of America’s domestic and international identity.



In *Sergeant York*, it is clear that neither the Puritan concept of community nor Franklin's call for the virtuous man is enough in the face of the international threat that the Nazis present. When York states quite simply, "War is killing and killing is against the Book," the film never suggests that this is wrongheaded or naive. York's statement is like Franklin in its homespun, adage-like phrasing and its simplistic prose rhetoric, and again neither Franklin nor the film *York* are trying to argue this point, but rather that it is not all of the answer. York, according to the film, is in the right mind; it is just that his view of community needs to be expanded. Religious conviction, and romantic love in the person of Gracie, are not the ultimate solution to the horrors of Hitler. The film contends that a complete individual ethos must also incorporate patriotic duty. However, the interventionists would, covertly, also be suggesting a further calling, duty to all humanity.

The second conversion moment for York is precipitated by his meeting with his Commanding Officer—a scene fabricated by the film.<sup>47</sup> In the Major's office, the Captain is losing a war of logic with York over "living by the sword," until the Major interrupts with a history book of the United States. The simple ethics of Franklin's virtuous man, an identity that held little conflict with interwar isolationism, now must transform, in the view of the Major and the filmmakers, into a new definition. The Major, in summarizing the book, explains to York, "That's your heritage . . . but the cost of that heritage is high."<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Birdwell considers that *Sergeant York*, and specifically the scene where York's Commanding Officer gives him a book on the history of the United States to help with the conversion from pacifist to warrior, deliberately exemplifies "the symbolic essence of America—the myth of its unique history as the new Eden and the last bastion of Judeo-Christian ethics" (*Celluloid* 120). Thus, America is the combination of the new and the old and is still connected to the original Puritan identity.

<sup>48</sup> On one hand, the Major's appeal to the "heritage" of America's fight for freedom, would seem to be a connection to Franklin and the founding fathers, but when it is remembered that Franklin's *Autobiography* omits any mention of the Revolution, we see the disconnect between Franklin's concept of the American

The Major's appeal in his office is not enough. York receives leave to return home to consider his ethical dilemma and the Major allows him to take the book. In true Romantic fashion, York retreats into the hills to "think" his way through his predicament. The solution comes from the scriptures but in a logical Aristotelian mode. The answer to the two voices battling in York's head, manifested on film by the audible internal dialogue of "God" and "Country," as Romanticism would want, is provided by nature. The wind blows the scriptures open to "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God that which is God's." The scene is the ultimate cinematic hybridization of logic and the spiritual, of reality and idealism. Unlike York's first conversion, which is supernatural and communal, this second transformation, despite the intervention of nature, is clearly an exercise in reason and is clearly, as the Romantic would also appreciate, a product of solitude. However, despite these influences of reason and Romanticism, the end of the film suggests the ultimate supremacy of spirituality with York's summation of all that has happened to him: "The Lord sure do move in mysterious ways." The final line is a nod to the historic York's philosophy.

Humor also pervades this film, not to the extent of Franklin's *Autobiography*, but we are reminded that one of the characteristics of classic Hollywood is that of injecting comic relief into films that are quite serious.<sup>49</sup> Although such moments often seem to clash with the film's tone, most of the time it supplies a lighthearted respite. This type of gentle humor is found in *York* when he is relating his plan to get bottomland to a neighbor who keeps interrupting him. Finally,

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identity, which was not overtly a warrior identity, and the view of national identity that the film advocates.

<sup>49</sup> "Hawks once stated in an interview that he always searches for a comic angle on the grimmest material" (Sarris 48).

York says, "I'm trying to explain." His neighbor says, "Well go ahead. No one is a-stopping you." In as unaggressive a manner as the "reborn" York can manage, he responds, "Oh yes they ere." This is mildly humorous and very subtle, just as Franklin's distinctly American wit. Sometimes the humor seems to serve a relatively innocuous purpose such as the rollicking, rambunctious barroom brawling of the wilder York. Such lighthearted violence is not uncommon in classical Hollywood and is especially associated with Hawks and John Ford as a necessary component of male bonding. A much more troubling application of humor is found in the groundwork set during York's winning of the shooting match. He wins the Turkey shoot by "gobbling," which gets the turkeys to raise their heads, thus opening them up as targets. During his fight with the Germans, York employs the same technique of "gobbling," which causes the Germans to raise their heads and expose themselves, essentially dehumanizing the enemy to the level of animals. Humor is also employed to make sure York never appears a true globalist as any international sophistication would clash with his homespun American identity. For example, when presented with his medals by the French official, York is quietly but noticeably startled by the Frenchman's kiss of congratulations. Thus, the film reassures the audience that becoming a citizen of the world does mean becoming Europeans.

Whenever a persona is created on page or screen, it becomes a hybridization of reality and authorial concept. The ambiguity resulting from this hybridization is not only a conflict between reality and persona but also presents ambiguity within the character himself. Although York professes later that he killed to save lives, this statement stands in contrast to the shooting of a defenseless German prisoner who is responsible for his comrade's death. This act can be seen in no other way but revenge. Similarly, the call to a new kind of patriotism is blurred by

York's battlefield success, which is as due to luck as it is to courage. In reality, doing "the right thing" does not ensure success. Is York's heroism the right appeal for the film to make, considering that success in warfare is so reliant on luck? York's wartime exploits, especially as depicted in the film, could so easily have turned out very different. Righteousness does not ensure victory, yet that is precisely the unspoken implication of this film. This seems very similar to Franklin's success which at times appears to be the result of hard work, at others the result of inner virtue, and at still others just fortuitous circumstances. Virtue versus effort versus luck is a troublesome aspect of both Franklin's *Autobiography* and *Sergeant York*. This ambiguity would seem to keep both works from veering into propaganda, since propaganda is always very careful not to be ambiguous.

## Chapter Four

### Melville and Ford: Ahab and the Duke

Franklin's man is a frugal, inoffensive, thrifty citizen,  
but savors of nothing heroic. (Emerson 12:255)  
The essential American soul is hard, isolate, stoic, and  
a killer. (Lawrence 66)

It should not be inferred that American exceptionalism need always be seen as a positive thing. The extent to which American exceptionalism is connected to the concept of "greatness" lies in the ability to accept the uniqueness of the American experience as possessing both great good and great wrong. This ambiguity, or more precisely this hybridization, as earlier ascribed to Hawthorne in Chapter One, is also central to the writing of Herman Melville. As Romantics, both writers were enthralled by symbolism, and, as late American Romantics, equally concerned with the fallibility of the symbol. The paramount example of ambiguous imagery is, of course, the whiteness of the whale, which is simultaneously all colors and no color. Melville's 1851 opus *Moby-Dick*<sup>1</sup> is also concerned with the seemingly contradictory aspects of American greatness. Nowhere is this more perfectly exemplified than in the person of Captain Ahab, who is both god-like and ungodly.<sup>2</sup> This seemingly contradictory description is why we may see

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<sup>1</sup> To some extent, Melville based *Moby-Dick* on the real-life events of the Essex, a whaler which was sunk by a whale in 1820. In the 2010 documentary *Into the Deep*, the narrator says that the Essex "whose dark and dreamlike voyage would haunt the memory of American whaling for generations to come, give rise to one of the most remarkable works of literature ever created by an American, and, like whaling itself, raise large and searching questions about the relation of human beings to each other, to other species and to the planet. Furthermore, *Into the Deep* states that in *Moby-Dick*, Melville would create "an allegory of the human condition and a riveting parable, both bright and dark, of the reckless expanding American republic."

<sup>2</sup> "He's a grand, ungodly, god-like man" (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 79).

Ahab as both hero and villain; he is, in fact, the epitome of American exceptionalism in all its strengths and weaknesses.

Similarly, the American pursuit of wealth and of conquest is both a civilizing force and an unhinging one and demonstrates a connection between American whaling and the “settling” of the west. In the documentary, *Into the Deep*, marine biologist Michael Moore even points out a cause-and-effect relationship: “The wealth that was generated by the Yankee whalers fueled the expansion of this country. So that out of the banks of New Bedford . . . came the necessities to head west.” The literature of the New World clearly saw a connection between whaling and a national identity, one with concepts of heroism distinct from the Old World, yet at the same time, in a transatlantic sense, descendent from them:

Mature considerations of democracy centered about the subject of heroism. It was his [Melville’s] ardent wish that in democratic America . . . a new race of giants would arise, counterparts of the great giants who had walked abroad in former times . . . and the crew of a Yankee whaler were the descendants of those Gothic kings. (Geist 10-11)

Nathaniel Philbrick, author of *In the Heart of the Sea*, sees certain national traits as epitomized in whaling:

It was an endeavor that inspired so much of what would become the defining characteristics of America . . . there is violence, there is a spiritual sense of destiny [and] . . . at the center of it, is this bloodlust for the hunt . . . that’s the definition of America. (*Into the Deep*)

In Philbrick’s description of American whaling, we plainly hear the language of Manifest

Destiny. “Fate in *Moby-Dick* and Manifest Destiny . . . are kindred constructs.<sup>3</sup> Ahab and

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<sup>3</sup> In 1950, Smith saw the ocean and the west as competing narratives: “The early visions of an American empire embody two different, if often mingled conceptions. There is on the one hand the notion of empire as command of the sea, and on the other hand the notion of empire as a populous future society occupying the interior of the American continent” (H. Smith 12). However, by 1998, Tony Tanner saw a clear connection between whaling and Manifest Destiny: “The conquest of the continent . . . [including] the dark depredations and expropriations on which America built itself . . . saw a return to conditions

America, bearers both of a timeless destiny, mirror each other in familial likeness” (Dimock 204). Both are representations of the American identity and can be linked to Franklin’s intrepid individual. In 1775, Edmund Burke praised the entrepreneurial spirit of American whalers who outdo the rest of the world.<sup>4</sup> When the world craved whale oil, “of 900 whaling vessels of all nations in 1846, 735 were American” (Olson 19).<sup>5</sup>

The parallels between whaling and the westward movement are more than just historic and economic; the connection is also, as Philbrick suggests, a poetic one:

The poetry of whaling . . . is the deepest and darkest poetry of America . . . at the center of it is the whale, this huge creature . . . that can attack a human being, but possesses a secret, possesses oil that in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century was really the heart blood of American commerce. But there’s also the sea. So, you have this creature in this vast wilderness, and I think it’s the wilderness aspect of the sea that gives it the poetry that goes way beyond anything that we’re familiar with today. It’s a deep language. (*Into the Deep*)

Moreover, by the time of Hawthorne and Melville, it can be said that the American literary psyche had matured enough to thoroughly explore this darker side of “Americanism.” Similarly, American cinema, by the end of the classic period, would be ready to explore more infamous national traits in one of its most treasured genres, the Western.

The language of the *wilderness* is at the heart of the Western and of *Moby-Dick*, and from it derives concepts of national exceptionalism. As Robert Ray writes, “American space, economic abundance, and geographical isolation—and the fictions embroidered around these things—had long been unavailable to the European imagination” (Ray 56). However, Ray’s

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associated with an archaic, ‘heroic’ age—the raw individualism, the violence, the brawling and boasting, the storytelling, the superstitions, the unsocialized conditions of life . . . all these were to be found on the American frontier as on the American whaling ship” (ix).

<sup>4</sup> “Conciliation with America.” *The Works of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke*, vol. 2, pp. 31-32.

<sup>5</sup> “Two thirds of this terraqueous globe are the Nantucketer’s. For the sea is his; he owns it, as emperors own empires.” (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 64)

comment suggests the notion of *myth* and that ideas of national identity require further scrutiny. Indeed, Jane Tompkins strikingly and alluringly describes the Western as, “Thriving on physical sensation, wedded to violence, dominated by the need for domination, and imprisoned by its own heroic code” (5). The darkest implication of the conquest of the wilderness is that “the Other in the Western forms a cultural threat” (Mitchell 135). This is an issue which is at the core of John Ford’s 1956 *The Searchers*. In this film, Ford creates the screen equivalent of Ahab in Ethan Edwards (John Wayne) and, in so doing, presents unique insight into the American identity.

This chapter will examine the connection between Melville’s *Moby-Dick* and the evolving Hollywood Western as epitomized by *The Searchers*. It will do so by exploring the construction and deconstruction of national myth, the relationship between character and environment, the liminal zones of American Romanticism and the Western, and the ambiguity that lies in concepts of heroism and villainy. This chapter argues that Ethan Edwards is a modern incarnation of Ahab, in whom strengths and weaknesses, virtues and flaws, courage and borderline insanity, all blend into that same driving pioneer spirit, which is central to American exceptionalism, and which, for both good and ill, carved out a nation from the wilderness.

### **Of Whales and Indians**

This chapter asserts that the whale in *Moby-Dick* is analogous to the role indigenous peoples play in the Western, in general, but even more specifically in *The Searchers*. However, this comparison is also to be found within Melville’s tale itself.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the very ship upon

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<sup>6</sup> In 2003, Laurie Robertson-Lorant asserted that *Moby-Dick* contains many allusions, from slavery to Puritanism, including the near-extinction of Native Americans. “In *Moby-Dick* . . . Melville draws on deep underground rivers of Native American folklore and myth to create a ghost dance that mourns the closing of America’s spiritual frontiers: a vision quest” (380). Some of her parallels are stronger than others. For example, she states that the first-person narrative format is meant to evoke oral tradition rather than literary ones (381), but obviously first-person narratives had become a very common



which the hunt for the White Whale is conducted is named after a long vanished Indian tribe.

Melville even makes several physical connections between the whale and the Indians. In Chapter 32, Melville describes the Right-Whale Porpoise as possessing “sentimental Indian eyes of a hazel hue” (114). In Chapter 75, he compares the inside of the whale’s head to a wigwam (334). In Chapter 68, he compares the many marks on the whale’s body to Indian engraving on rocks (306), and he even says that blubber covers the whale like an Indian poncho (307).

Perhaps the strangest connection between the whale and the Native American occurs in Chapter 78 where Melville suggests that had Tashtego, the Native American harpooner of the *Pequod*, died when he fell into the whale’s head that it would have been “a very precious perishing” (344), thus linking in a deep sense the death of the whale and of Native Americans.

Melville’s linking of Native Americans to the whale, specifically, is also evident in his synthesis of the Indian with nature, in general. First, in Chapter 14, Melville uses the Indian folklore of how they originally came to Nantucket. He suggests that the story of an Indian infant carried off by an eagle out to sea not only explains how Native Americans first came to the island but also accounts for the Nantucketers’ drive to take to the sea (63-64). Melville’s connection between Native Americans and the environment is evident in his description of their esteem for nature:

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storytelling technique in British literature. Robertson-Lorant bases her comparison largely on her interpretation of Melville’s text as anti-single-perspective (380-1). This characteristic of *Moby-Dick* is undeniable, but it is not specifically native-American-centric as an alternative perspective. The best connection that she makes between the whale and the Indian is in the ever-progressing push to extinction. She points out that in Chapter 45, “The Affidavit,” Melville makes an analogy that “yokes the fanaticism of Indian-fighters with the fanaticism of whale-hunters . . . to bring to the foreground victimized animals and people” (384). She also reminds us that the owners of the *Pequod* sit in a teepee made of whale bones.

Most famous in our Western annals and Indian traditions is that of the White Steed of the Prairies . . . in whatever aspect he presented himself, always to the bravest Indians he was the object of trembling reverence and awe. (*Moby-Dick* 191)

This deference to nature stands in stark contrast with Ahab's lack of respect. Furthermore, the ship is most in harmony with nature when it matches the rhythm of life such as in the pounding of the mat-making, from which "derived such a marvelous cadence as from Tashtego the Indian's" (215). In other words, the *Pequod* is most like nature when it is like the Indians.

The significance of the environment in *Moby-Dick*, as the next section will expand on, is demonstrated in the numerous comparisons between the sea and the prairie. Melville asserts that there are times when the whaler develops a "land-like feeling toward the sea...[and] regards it as so much flowery earth," and in this assertion, Melville compares the high rolling waves to "the tall grass of a rolling prairie" (491). In Chapter 14, Melville states, "The Nantucketer...lives on the sea, as prairie cocks in the prairie" (64), and that the whaler "hunts for his oil...even as the traveler on the prairie hunts up his own supper of game" (426).

The hunt also reminds us that the Native American harpooner, Tashtego, also makes a link between whales and Indians and between the sea and the prairie. "No longer snuffing in the trail of the wild beasts of the woodland, Tashtego now hunted in the wake of the great whales of the sea" (120).<sup>7</sup> Melville, in emphasizing the hunt, also acknowledges that the hunt can be reversed. He compares the harpooners to wolves, but in a foreshadowing of the ultimate fate of the *Pequod*, he reminds us that the whaler can fall to the whale, as the wolves "fall into the

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<sup>7</sup> Despite Tashtego's assimilation among the white hunters, Melville suggests that a distinct difference continues to exist between Native American and Yankee perspectives. As Robertson-Lorant reminds us, "When Tashtego sees that Stubb, excited by the kill, is still stabbing and probing the dead body of the whale, he says solemnly, 'He dead, Mr. Stubb', as if honoring the spirit of the whale" (385-6).

hidden snare of the Indians” (165), again linking the whale to the Indians. In fact, Melville compares the whales’ attacks upon whalers as hurling “entire boats with all their oars and crews into the air, very much as an Indian juggler tosses his balls” (378).<sup>8</sup> The fact that the hunt can be reciprocal is integral not just to *Moby-Dick*, but to the Western as well.

The reverse side of the hunt is used in the Western to justify the slaughter of Native Americans and Melville, despite his admiration for the Indians, also creates passages that lay the groundwork for their demonization. For instance, Ishmael declares “the Sperm Whale not only to be a consternation to every other creature in the sea, but also to be so incredibly ferocious as continually to be athirst for human blood” (181). Melville describes the whale as “invested with natural terror” and possessing of “intelligent malignity” (183). This language moves the whale from force of nature to agent of evil and bolsters Ahab’s revenge and represents the difference between the classic Western genre and *The Searchers*. Indeed, Melville, in Chapter 27, finds that Tashtego’s ferocity as a hunter lends credit to the Puritan’s characterization of the Indian as “son of the Prince of the Powers of the Air” (120). The Prince of the Powers of the Air is a sobriquet for the Devil.

This venomous language reminds us that both *Moby-Dick* and the Western film are steeped in the erasure of the Indian. Indeed, it is not insignificant that the last member of the *Pequod* to perish is Tashtego. *Moby-Dick* underscores this racial decimation by its commonality with the eradication of the whale. In his ultimate comparison between Indian and whale, Melville asks “whether Leviathan can long endure so wide a chase, and so remorseless a havoc;

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<sup>8</sup> No doubt Melville is referring to a juggler from India, as this paragraph includes a comparison between whales and elephants, but even so, this comparison reminds us of the European misnaming of Native Americans.

whether he must not at last be exterminated from the waters, and the last whale, like the last man, smoke his last pipe, and then himself evaporate in the final puff" (460). In this sense, *Moby-Dick* ends where *The Searchers* picks up.

### **Myth: Construction and Deconstruction**

In both *Moby-Dick* and the Western, setting and hero are inseparable. The landscape of the West, in all its harsh beauty and its relentless challenge to humans, is as central to the development of the Western character as is the vastness of the ocean,<sup>9</sup> and its seemingly adversarial role to Man, to the development of Ahab. John Ford, just as he instilled Monument Valley as the accepted visual representation of the West, also ingrained in the language of the Western the epitome of the genre's archetypal hero when he elevated John Wayne to stardom. In many ways, the Western hero harkened back to Franklin's rugged individualism.

Notions of frontier and wilderness, in a general sense, and the West, in a specific sense, have played a key role in developing American identity. As Frederick Jackson Turner writes, "The advance of the frontier has meant a steady movement away from the influence of Europe" (4).<sup>10</sup> Indeed, after the War of 1812, national self-assertion, the Monroe Doctrine and raw Jacksonianism, all meant that "America was becoming Americanized; and the further west it went the more truly American it then became" (Bradsher 281). In one sense, this westward emphasis would seem to exclude Melville's whaling world, as Turner writes, "The true point of

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<sup>9</sup> "To a dreamy meditative man it is delightful. There you stand a hundred feet above the silent decks, striding along the deep, as if the masts were gigantic stilts, while beneath you and between your legs . . . swim the hugest monsters of the sea . . . there you stand, lost in the infinite series of the sea, with nothing ruffled but the waves . . . a sublime uneventfulness invests you" (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 156).

<sup>10</sup> This sentiment was also expressed by Ralph Waldo Emerson who stated, "Europe stretches to the Alleghenies; America lies beyond" (quoted by Foerster 29).

view in the history of this nation is not the Atlantic Coast, it is the Great West . . . the frontier is . . . the meeting point between savagery and civilization” (3), but it is the last part of Turner’s comment that shows the bond with Melville.

The passion that drove him [Melville] into the discovery of his ambiguities was peculiarly American . . . our distance from the center of civilization had repeatedly caused our writers to question things that Europeans took for granted. (Matthiessen 475)

Certainly one of the greatest national distinctions is that both Ahab and the Western hero see nature as adversarial, not the communing relationship between Man and Nature as espoused by the early British Romantics.

The struggle of the individual against the wilderness is also closely linked to traditional notions of masculinity. The appeal to masculinity, as projected by the Western into the myth of the West, is summarized nicely by Louis L’Amour, “It was a hard land, and it bred hard men to hard ways” (15).<sup>11</sup> The connection between the centrality of nature to the Western can be clearly seen as a response to more female-centered literature. As Tompkins writes, “The Western answers the domestic novel . . . [and as such seeks] the destruction of female authority” (39).<sup>12</sup> In so doing, the Western creates a clear gender polarity, celebrating individualism over society, physicality over rhetoric, and masculine independence over patriarchal commitment (Mitchell 119). Furthermore, what is true of the Western and masculinity is also true of Melville:

What makes *Moby-Dick* so exhilarating is its extravagant plunge into the manly American mind: its zest for exploration, its awe at pain, its rapture at the hunt . . . its craving for dominance. (Leverenz 305)

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<sup>11</sup> See Introduction p. 5 for acknowledgement of the debt cinematic Westerns owed to the literary Western. Such authors as L’Amour and Zane Gray helped to create the Western hero which had a direct influence on the early Western hero of film. However, this chapter argues that the darker, more complex Western hero of *The Searchers* and later cinema has more indebtedness to Melville.

<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Ahab’s monomania is in fact a “representative, redemptive mission to avenge all those who have been unmanned . . . [through] manly rage . . . Ahab’s passion for dominance is the obsession of nineteenth-century American men, the complement to female hysteria” (Leverenz 287).

Obviously, gender norms are a significant aspect of the myth-building identity of both Melville and Hollywood.

Hollywood's idea of American masculinity has had many incarnations but no screen hero has ever embodied machismos for more viewers than John Wayne. The very name has become synonymous with tough, manly demeanor. This persona is described by Tompkins as "the legitimization of physical violence" (174). In addition, as suggested earlier, that persona is intrinsically linked with the hero's environment. "The rhetoric of the landscape works in favor of the particular masculine ideal Westerns enforce" (Tompkins 77). No single figure better links these attributes of national identity and masculinity than John Wayne, a screen persona which was not limited to the Western. "John Wayne, the actor whose name is synonymous with Western films, became the symbol of American masculinity from World War II to Vietnam" (Tompkins 5). American audiences knew the "Duke" as not just a Western star but also as the hero of countless War movies. The not-so subtle suggestion of this is that the same rugged individualism that allowed Americans to "tame" the West, would also allow them to crush the specter of German Fascism and Japanese Imperialism. Richard Slotkin explains this connection: "Even when he was cast in other kinds of films, his role was usually designed to refer more or less explicitly to his soldier/cowboy persona . . . Wayne's identification with war and the West linked him with a highly specific set of myth-historical referents" (*Gunfighter* 512-3). Indeed, during the shooting of the film *The Green Berets*, a small Vietnamese boy supposedly ran up to Wayne and said, "You number one cowboy?"

The admirable traits vested in the Western hero are also present in Ahab. Tompkins description of the Western hero equally applies to Melville's captain of the *Pequod*:

All the qualities required of the protagonist are qualities required to complete an excruciatingly difficult task: self-discipline; unswerving purpose; the exercise of knowledge, skill, ingenuity, and excellent judgment; and a capacity to continue in the face of total exhaustion and overwhelming odds. (12)

Ahab's anger, or if we wish to call it lunacy, must be channeled into his knowledge of the ocean and of the movement of whales for his task to succeed. Ahab is the competent "hero," who, like the lone Western hero, meets a challenge with an "exigency only he understands" (Tompkins 144).

However, just as Melville's Ahab is a hero that combines admirable and deplorable traits, so too did the evolving nature of the Western, at least toward the end of classic Hollywood, enigmatize its main character. It is appropriate that Ford, who bears much of the responsibility for establishing the stalwart characteristics of the Western hero, was also the one to eventually depict a much darker Western "hero" in *The Searchers* and do so via his star/hero John Wayne. In *The Searchers*, the "tall-in-the-saddle," white-hat-wearing, Western hero becomes a much less attractive protagonist. Newton Arvin's description of Ahab aptly fits the hero of *The Searchers*: "He is our hatred ennobled, as we would wish to have it, up to heroism" (171).

The mythologizing of the West eventually came under assault.<sup>13</sup> To whatever degree there is accuracy in such myths is to a Romantic, such as Melville, irrelevant: "It is not down in any map; true places never are" (*Moby-Dick* 55). Furthermore, as recently as 1950, Henry Nash Smith defended Turner's emphasis on the frontier,<sup>14</sup> yet by 1986, Smith felt the need to

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<sup>13</sup> One of the earliest voices to explore the darker side of the myth of the West, at least in the cinema, was Robert Warshow, who compared the Western hero to the film gangster. Both were cinematic personas who followed their own code and lived by the gun. Both the gangster and the westerner are dominated by loneliness and melancholy (Warshow 191). Although not as clearly outside the law as the film gangster, Warshow believes that the Western hero, nonetheless, "exhibits a moral ambiguity which darkens his image" (195).

<sup>14</sup> See *Virgin Land*, especially p. 4.

“apologize” for the lack of condemnation in his original work. By that time, a much harsher evaluation of the myth of the West was epitomized by Slotkin’s description of the frontier myth as “a savage war of extermination or subjugation, with ‘civilization itself’ as the stakes” (*Fatal* 241).

The evolution and ultimate demise of the Western, so long a staple of classic Hollywood, is a perfect representation of the changing attitude toward the myth of the West. The passing of classic Hollywood, the receding role of the studio system, the distortion of the traditional narrative style, went hand in hand with transformations in social and political conventions. Positioned at this fulcrum is the 1962 film *How the West Was Won*, a rambling, disjointed, hodge-podge of vignettes on the settling of the west which ends with the following epilogue:

The West that was won by its pioneers, settlers, adventurers is long gone now. Yet it is theirs forever. For they left tracks in history that will never be eroded by wind or rain, never plowed under by tractors, never buried in the compost of events. Out of the hard simplicity of their lives, out of their vitality, their hopes, and their sorrows, grew legends of courage and pride to inspire their children and their children’s children. From soil enriched by their blood, out of their fever to explore and build, came lakes where were once were burning deserts, came the goods of the earth, mines and wheat fields, orchards and great lumber mills, all the sinews of a growing country. Out of their rude settlements, their trading posts, came cities to rank among the great ones of the world—all the heritage of a people free to dream, free to act, free to mold their own destiny.

Such a praiseworthy tone for westward expansion, just like the classic Hollywood style itself, would not last the decade and it is difficult to hear these words and to think that the same industry by 1970, a mere eight years later, would produce *Little Big Man*.

Praise for westward expansion became exposed in light of its harsh and racist realities. Racism is a cornerstone of Slotkin’s view of the myth of the West, as indeed it is of *The Searchers*. In a review of Slotkin’s work, William Cronon summarizes this viewpoint:



Slotkin's central theme has always been that, contrary to Turner and Smith, the frontier myth was as much about fighting Indians as about taking virgin land. As a consequence of this insight, the frontier hero derives his mythic status from his regenerative (but ultimately self-destructive) ability to enter wild nature and assimilate the virtues of Indian savagery to those of white civilization without becoming entangled in the corresponding vices of either. In the mythic landscape of America, all places lay along a progressive continuum between frontier and metropolis, with the hero serving as a violent mediator between the two poles. (202)

In this encapsulation, we see that despite the admission of a darker side of the Western hero, there is still a recognition of heroic attributes and a tacit suggestion that those characteristics were required by society.<sup>15</sup>

Melville also recognized this combination of heroic and villainous traits and its resulting ambiguity:

To Melville the Wild West, like nature in general, came to seem in the highest degree ambiguous. It was not more certainly good than bad, yet in either case it was terrible and magnificent . . . metaphorical material derived from the Wild West plays an important part in *Moby-Dick*. (H. Smith 78)

While classic Hollywood, for most of its existence, ignored the darker side of myth, Melville embraced it: “*Moby-Dick* is . . . certainly about the incredible dangers of myth-making” (McLoughlin 62).<sup>16</sup> Indeed, *The Searchers*, in solidarity with *Moby-Dick*, begs the question “How far can a hero go and still be a hero?” (Slotkin, *Gunfighter* 464).

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<sup>15</sup> The Western “continued to be a staple throughout the Classical Period . . . [mostly because] of its core mythic elements . . . the transformation of the beautiful but dangerous western wilderness into a safe and civilized environment” (Jewell 197).

<sup>16</sup> Some would see *Moby-Dick* as not only dealing with the dangers of myth-building but engaging in it as well. “While this novel about work and workers seems to propose an almost encyclopedic factuality, all its explanatory detail is put ultimately into the service of what you might call a mythology, or an overarching way of thinking about the place of human beings in the universe” (Mackay 107).

## Heroes and Villains

Heroism has always been a question of perspective, but this is especially true in issues of the Western. For instance, the stereotypical Western hero never truly belongs inside the civilized world. Indeed, Robert Ray believes that classic Hollywood promoted an American mythology centered on the “opposition of natural man versus civilized man” (59). The hero of the Western seems too large for the swinging doors of the saloon. Physical size is almost a necessity for the American Western hero with Alan Ladd in *Shane* (1953) a rare exception. While he often comes into town, the Western hero never seems as at home there, as he does out on the range. In what Bazin considered the epitome of the Western genre, the 1939 *Stagecoach*, John Wayne’s figure appears for the first time as Ford’s quintessential Western hero, alone, unhorsed, in the middle of nowhere, and introduced through rough and intrusive camera move. While he joins the “ship” filled with various representatives of different aspects of society, he is clearly not one of them. In fact, it is never quite clear what side of the law he is on.<sup>17</sup> The Western hero may love the schoolmarm, but he is more kindred spirit with the saloon or dance hall girl. He often aids law enforcement, but he is only seldom a lawman himself, and when he is, his fit with society is always uneasy, i.e. Gary Cooper’s Will Kane in *High Noon*.

The Western hero’s strength and courage is necessary for the settling of the West and yet he himself is not the future of civilization. The reason for this utilization but exclusion is due to the fact that the Western hero contains attributes that in the civilized world might seem undesirable. This is best on display in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962), a film whose plot, and even title, demonstrates the gulf between the rough and rugged, who bring a civilized

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<sup>17</sup> An attribute that will connect the Western hero to his more modern film counterpart—the film noir hero—dark, loner, hardboiled, walking the twilight world between law-abiding and criminal.

nation into existence, and the more genteel and law-abiding who lay claim to the heritage of their predecessors. Both Ahab and the Western hero possess talents and skills that make them indispensable to the times. However, when they outlive their purpose, they tend to be rejected by the society that benefitted from them.<sup>18</sup> Like the Western hero, the American whaler provided a crucial service. “For God's sake, be economical with your lamps and candles! Not a gallon you burn, but at least one drop of man's blood was spilled for it.” (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 206). In the providing of whale oil, or in the settling of the west, the price is paid by the natural world, and the civilized world would rather not acknowledge the ugliness of how its needs were met. Richard Chase calls Ahab “the culture hero . . . who kills the monsters, making man’s life possible,” but also sees him as “the American cultural image: the captain of industry and of his soul; the exploiter of nature who severs his own attachment to nature and exploits himself out of existence” (*Herman* 41). The Western hero embodies the great paradox of Romanticism itself in which the “imagination redeems, but it also destroys” (McLoughlin 73). In addition, it is through Romanticism that we also see a necessity beyond just the pragmatic: “Heroism is the most persistent of romantic illusions . . . it is likewise the most necessary” (Geist 9).

The straddling of civilization and savagery is central to the Western hero, whose dual character is described by Melville in *Israel Potter* as “civilized in the externals but a savage at heart” (197), but is it uniquely American? Slotkin certainly sees a commonality with other genres. “The epics with non-American settings add to the traditional ‘savage’ stereotypes . . . the

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<sup>18</sup> “As the reign of law settles over the West . . . [the Westerner] is forced to see that his day is over . . . [and his story] end[s] with his death [like Ahab] or with his departure [like *The Searchers*]” (Warshow 194).

self-willed White male hero . . . stands for the highest values of civilization and progress” (*Gunfighter* 505). If Slotkin is correct then the Anglophilia of classic Hollywood, the predilection for movies based on British literature and British history, is closely akin to the Western. In addition, the character who exhibits dual citizenship in both nature and civilization, often also straddles, as does the film noir hero, the law-abiding and the lawless. Certainly, the fact that Ford’s Ringo Kid in *Stagecoach* is a borderline outlaw is not uniquely American. English tradition can mark the loveable rogue back to Robin Hood, and yet the Westerner is a much darker figure than the lusty, lighthearted hero of Sherwood Forest. Robin Hood is driven to live like an outlaw because the system has been corrupted and Robin’s rightful role has been stolen. Thus, the outlaw/hero that comes to us via the Robin Hood legend is not the same as the Western loner who does not belong in the system because of *who he is*, not because of *what has been done to him*. Certainly, an attribute of the Western hero in much of Ford’s canon, especially the cavalry trilogy, is about duty and a decided sense of belonging. However, it is the Western loner who comes to dominate the genre and makes possible Ford’s later, darker Western figures. Moreover, it is Melville who, according to David Reynolds, makes the connection between quasi-legality and the American identity:

The stereotypes of the likable criminal or the justified pariah are the single most commonly probed characters in Melville’s fiction. Melville evidently believed that by studying these paradoxical figures he was getting to the core of America itself. (279)

Daniel Hoffman sees *Moby-Dick* as taking frontier independence and pushing it “to the point of self-damning isolation . . . Yankee guile without a saving grace . . . [even] to the point of demonic inhumanity” (310). Clearly, Ahab, like the Westerner, is a hybrid hero and villain.

The idea that good and evil, light and dark, are inexorably intertwined in any identity, personal or cultural, was at the heart and soul of American Romanticism long before the screen Western approached such darker attributes, and certainly Melville was a central examiner of this light and dark duality. As stated earlier, despite efforts to identify uniquely American narratives, transatlanticism emphasizes congruities between various authors and various works. Many have drawn connections between the seafaring, tragic ambiance of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* or between Ahab's monomania and the main character of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Although these similarities undeniably exist, there is, nonetheless, a distinctly American feel to Melville's opus.<sup>19</sup> The ancient mariner's clash with nature seems arbitrary and *Frankenstein* is driven by the danger that Romanticism saw in unbridled science. With Ahab, however, a personal arrogance, pride, is uniquely on display: "I'd strike the sun if it insulted me" (*Moby-Dick* 164). It is an embodiment of the American character as considerably flawed and yet possessing of a determination that is both disdainful in its recklessness and yet also somehow equally admirable. Ahab embodies a liminal zone where heroic confidence and blasphemous hubris are indistinguishable.

Ahab is neither villain nor tragic hero; he is the archetypical American hero. "The American hero is simply facing his own duplex nature—the light and darkness within himself—and the duplex nature of experience" (Porte 10). Van Wyck Brooks writes that in Whitman, "the hitherto incompatible extremes of the American temperament were fused" (112). While Brooks

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<sup>19</sup> The Americanness of *Moby-Dick* actually lies in its transatlantic connections. "It's not merely a repetition of the *Mariner*, but a reading of it. It's not merely a repetition of Shelley's *Frankenstein*, but a reading of it" (Einboden).

is describing Whitman, it was first true of Melville. In *Moby-Dick*, Melville defines Americanness in terms of “bristling polarities” (Reynolds 288). However, such dramatic distinctions as hero and villain do not fit well into Melville’s world of Romantic ambiguity. As Jeffrey Einboden explains:

He [Ahab] conforms to all of the typical ideas of the antihero or the villain, but the success of the novel, the endurance of the novel is the way in which villainy itself transcends the dialectic of good and evil . . . we have to reappropriate those terms or reinvent those terms . . . made problematic by the novel.

The status of Ahab as hero has its own analytic evolution. Brian Higgins and Hershel Parker remind us that “until the 1950s, Ahab was regularly regarded as the hero” (23). In 1929, Lewis Mumford saw Ahab as pitted against the “malice of the universe” (184), a tragic hero who “in battling against evil, with power instead of love . . . becomes the image of the thing he hates . . . [and thus loses] his humanity in the very act of vindicating it” (186). In 1944, William Ellery Sedgewick made a similar observation: “Ahab is the hero . . . standing his full human stature against the immense mystery of creation . . . [and the] lawlessness of the universe” (97). In 1949, Chase described Ahab as a “false Prometheus”<sup>20</sup> and, in 1951, Henry Murray wrote that “Ahab is at heart a noble being,” and compared Ahab to Milton’s Satanic hero.<sup>21</sup> There would even come to be those who saw Ishmael and not Ahab as the hero of *Moby-Dick*.<sup>22</sup> The “Americanness” of Ahab, his distinction from the European Byronic hero, is that he is more focused and determined and less “moody.” He is less withdrawn than the Byronic hero, but

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<sup>20</sup> *Herman Melville: A Critical Study*. Macmillan, 1949, specifically pp. 4 and 47.

<sup>21</sup> “In Nomine Diaboli.” *The New England Quarterly*. vol. 24, no. 4 (Dec. 1951), specifically pp 451 and 441-42.

<sup>22</sup> For example, Walter Bezanson “*Moby-Dick: Work of Art*.” 1953. Originally read at Oberlin College 11.13.51

rather highly engaged. He is not pitted against society, but the whole of Nature. Ahab is the personification of Manifest Destiny—Byron, Mr. Rochester and Heathcliff are not.

Hero or not, one characteristic of Ahab that is almost universally cited is his suffering. “To the extent that he [Ahab] transcends it, finds ‘greatness’ in suffering, he is a tragic hero” (Sewall 104). Although Ahab’s dominant characteristic is often thought to be pride:

The raging egoism Ahab embodies has something in common with the Hubris of Greek tragedy, as it has also something, and still more, in common with the Christian sin of pride; but it is neither quite the one nor quite the other. (Arvin 179)

However, it can be argued that his pride “springs not out of conceit or vanity but out of suffering” (Geist 49). Indeed, in Melville’s world there is “no mistaking the instinctive supposition that sorrow was a nobler emotion than joy” (Geist 50). The *mélange* of suffering and pride, of hatred and fortitude, brings Ahab into irrefutable congruence with the disconcerting “hero” of *The Searchers*, Ethan Edwards. In *The Searchers*, not only is the issue of racism explored in a way no earlier Western had done, but it gave the Duke a character to portray with as many unattractive as admirable traits.

### ***Moby-Dick* (1851) and *The Searchers* (1956)**

*The Searchers* and *Moby-Dick* bear similarities beyond just the obvious monomaniacal quest and its inherent distortion of the hunter. Both Ethan Edwards and Ahab display what Mumford described as “Man’s heroic defiance of brute energy” (187), but their courage is greatly tainted. In *Form and Fable in American Fiction*, Hoffman describes a certain frontiersman, Colonel Moredock, as “a monomaniacal Indian-hater” (65). His description gives us a perfect connection to both Ahab, through his use of the term *monomaniacal*, and to Ethan Edwards, by the epithet *Indian-hater*. “It is noteworthy,” Hoffman opines, “that Melville’s

treatment of the woodsman whom he presents ideally and then in the grimness of his barbarous fixation, parallels the dualistic popular conceptions of frontier character” (65). This duality is inherent in both Edwards and Ahab and, in their respective texts, Melville and Ford bring forth a true depiction of American exceptionalism, equally deserving of both praise and condemnation. As William Sedgwick explains, “Human greatness carries heavy penalties” (101). Ahab’s “madness” is but the slaughter of whales, or the destruction of nature in a wider sense, writ large. The same can be said of Ethan Edwards, that he is merely an extreme extension of the destructive racism inherent in Manifest Destiny. In one sense, at least Ahab and Edwards, as opposed to the rest of their society, are honest about their vehemence.

The most obvious, connection between Melville’s novel and Ford’s film is the plot. While *The Searchers*’ narrative is much more relentless than *Moby-Dick*’s, seldom taking time for reflective digression as Melville does, the resemblance between the two storylines is nonetheless readily detectable. Melville’s epic journey of a monomaniacal search on the part of a whaling captain for one very specific white whale, which has taken the captain’s leg on a previous voyage, clearly parallels Ford’s film. *The Searchers*, set in Texas, presents the story of Ethan Edwards who returns to his brother’s homestead after the American Civil War. While Ethan and other settlers are out investigating rumors of a Comanche rising, his brother and his brother’s family are all killed in an Indian attack, all save his very young niece Debbie (younger - Lana Wood, older – Natalie Wood), who has been abducted by the Comanches. The kidnapping leads Ethan on a relentless, multi-year search for Debbie. Ahab’s search for Moby Dick takes the crew of the *Pequod* on a three-year journey; Ethan and Martin Pawley (Jeffrey Hunter), a relative only by adoption, strive for five years to find Debbie. Ethan’s commitment is



every bit as monomaniacal as that of Captain Ahab. In fact, Ethan states what could be Ahab's creed:

Injun will chase a thing until he thinks he's chased it enough. Then he quits. Same when he runs. Seems like he never learns there's such a thing as a critter that'll just keep comin' on. So we'll find 'em in the end, I promise ya. We'll find 'em...just as sure as the turnin' of the earth.

Both Ethan and Ahab are "critters that'll just keep comin' on," and with both men, the quest will indeed take many "turnin's of the earth." Moreover, Ethan's vow is nearly identical to Ahab's vow: "I'll chase him round Good Hope, and round the Horn, and round the Norway Maelstrom, and round perdition's flames before I give him up" (*Moby-Dick* 163). Ahab's steadfast dedication, or obsession, with the quest is echoed in *The Searchers*, when Ethan is asked, "You wanna quit, Ethan," and his stoically curt response is, "That'll be the day."

Like his literary counterpart, Ethan's task also becomes warped and unnatural. Ethan becomes consumed with the idea that as Debbie grows up, she will become a squaw – a fate, which in Ethan's eyes, no White woman should live through. The girl he has set out to save becomes the woman he is out to kill. What Charles Feidelson says of Ahab's quest is also accurate of Ethan's: "As the mood of the voyager alters, from love to hate, the world of the Emersonian journey changes from hospitality to malice, and the 'living act' becomes an act of defiance" (34). The twisted nature of his goal is well rebuked by the words of Starbuck, the First Mate, to Ahab: "Vengeance on a dumb brute . . . that simply smote thee from blindest instinct . . . To be enraged with a dumb thing . . . seems blasphemous" (*Moby-Dick* 163-64). The connection is even keener when we realize that, in the Western, the Indians are every bit a force of Nature as a whale is to Starbuck. What is natural and what is unnatural is of no significance.

“Consumed by his monomania, Ahab ultimately projects his own uncontrolled ego on the universe” (McLoughlin 74), as does Ethan Edwards.

The relationship of the traditional Western hero and Ahab to nature, as examined earlier, is, as in many Ford Westerns, visually on display in *The Searchers*. The cinematography of the Western employs the wilderness in the same way that *Moby-Dick* employs the ocean/water literally. From the very opening shot of *The Searchers*, the relationship between civilization and the wilderness is visually established. *The Searchers* is filmed in VistaVision, the widescreen process pioneered by Paramount in 1954, and yet the story opens with a limiting shot within a shot. Most of the screen is in complete darkness, but a door opens to reveal the brilliant Technicolor landscape outside. The sliver of color is further impeded by the silhouette of the woman who has opened the door. The wilderness, nature, is constrained by civilization both in its domesticating structures and by “us,” who observe it from a viewpoint of separated comfort. The silhouette doorway is used again, and even more powerfully, when Ethan returns to the decimated homestead following the Comanche raid. In a similar manner, we are reminded very early in *Moby-Dick* that civilization to a man, and specifically an American man, is confining. A spirit expressed by Ishmael in the very first paragraph when he tells us that whenever he feels like “deliberately stepping into the street and methodically knocking people’s hats—then I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can” (*Moby-Dick* 3). Ishmael expresses the spirit of the Western, which resides in modern audiences, attracted to the uncivilized by that impulse which yearns to be wild. Furthermore, in *The Searchers*, Ethan first appears as an unrecognizable dot, lost in the expanse of the wilderness, just as Melville mediates on the image of the *Pequod* as a speck lost amid the vastness of the ocean. Like a whaling vessel, the Western

hero seems visually overwhelmed by the sheer immensity of nature, but they both come to thwart nature—to shape it to their will. The first reverse shot toward the homestead reveals how it, like the *Pequod*, is a lone representative of civilization, lost amid the expanse of the wilderness.

Settlers, like the Western hero, must bend and conform nature, but not in the same way or to the same degree. Unlike the settlers, the Western loner's goal is not domestication. The silhouetted doorway is the great demarcation between civilization and the wilderness. The homesteaders are Ethan's family, his brother, his brother's wife, their son and two daughters, but Ethan has not been "home" in eight years. Ethan's inappropriateness to this "settled" environment is obvious even once inside the cabin. John Wayne's real-life height of 6'4" is amplified by low-camera angles that make his head appear to be hitting the roof.

As previously discussed, the Western hero does not quite fit in within civilization, despite possessing talents that the group desires, and, in the case of Ahab and Ethan, this attribute is even more isolating and disquieting. Both Ahab and Ethan are lost between two worlds – society and nature – both are crude, rough, unrelenting and rejected by our modern sensibilities. In addition, Ethan also bears the questionable legality that surrounds the typical Western hero. On arriving home, Ethan presents his brother with newly minted coins, which arouses the brother's suspicions as to Ethan's post-war activities. When the Reverend (Ward Bond), who is also a captain in the Texas Rangers, appears, he calls Ethan the "Prodigal Son." The Reverend even asks Ethan if he is wanted somewhere. As the true Western hero, Ethan never admits to or denies living outside the law. Unlike the typical Western hero, however, the screen persona of John Wayne in *The Searchers* is much darker.<sup>23</sup> To appreciate the contradictions of positive and

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<sup>23</sup> It could also be argued that Howard Hawks was the first to darken the screen persona of John Wayne in the 1948 Western *Red River*. In this film, Wayne's character's courage is also overshadowed by his

negative characteristics, one must understand both Ahab's and Ethan's command over other men. The *Pequod* is a group ostracized from general society, and yet serving its needs, and unified by their unique task which also pits them against their environment.<sup>24</sup> This creates an incredibly distinct unit:

Melville suggests that in an *isolato* culture, individuals who feel cut off from each other . . . tend to understand their options for action solely in terms of violence and domination. The grand threat of an *isolato* culture is that when the individuals within act, they tend to act with a kind of brutality that is self-denying and ultimately self-destructing . . . Ahab's story . . . emanates from certain individualist conceits . . . [and] culminates in a desperate struggle for dominance. (McWilliams 238)

While all the members within follow only their own code, they also idolize the group leader, who personifies this distinct code. When challenged that his quest will not fetch the wealth that is expected of whaling, Ahab, gesturing to his heart, replies that it "will fetch a great premium *here!*" (*Moby-Dick* 163). "Ahab's charisma is apparent in the very way the crew follows him . . . [into] dangerous situations with a veneration bordering on worship and cosmic fear" (McLoughlin 68). Ahab's role within the group, his natural leadership, appears indestructible. When Starbuck questions the validity of the quest, Ahab emphatically responds, "The crew is with me." Starbuck finds himself in danger of being outside the group, because he cannot answer the all-important question which defines the group, "art not game for Moby Dick?" (*Moby-Dick* 163). Similarly, in *The Searchers*, the Reverend tells Ethan to "Let them [the Comanches] carry off their hurtin' dead." Ethan, however, continues shooting after the

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pride and even cruelty. Hawks' morphing of the Duke's persona may be seen as embryonic Ethan Edwards.

<sup>24</sup> Such a crew also reminds of us Howard Hawks. The crew of the *Pequod* qualifies as a Hawksian group. "The Hawksian heroes, who exclude others from their own elite group, are themselves excluded from society" (Wollen 84). Compare the men of the *Pequod* to the close-knit groups in *Rio Bravo* (1959) and its near twin, *El Dorado* (1966).

retreating Indians until the Reverend knocks down Ethan's rifle. Ethan erupts, "Well Reverend, that tears it. From now on you stay out of this. All of you. I don't want you with me. I don't need you for what I gotta do." The rescue party dwindles to only two, Ethan and Martin. Like Ishmael, Martin is puzzled by his own, almost blind following of his leader. Both Ethan and Ahab draw men to them, but also keep them at a distance. With Ethan, as "with Ahab, there's something that always retreats from accessibility" (Einboden), despite the way others are drawn to him. Like Ethan, who shuns the larger group, Ahab shuns the many passing vessels without extending the helping hand that the code of the sea requires. He is both a part of the whaling brotherhood and an outsider.

The defining characteristic of both Melville's and Ford's "hero" is the similarity between how Ethan views the Indian and Ahab views the whale. The extremism of the whaler's mantra, "A dead whale or a stove boat," seems as drastic and slaughter-oriented as that genocidal creed of westward expansion, "The only good Indian is a dead Indian." However, despite a prevailing atmosphere of racism, Ethan's bigotry exceeds anything possessed by the other settlers. When the Edwards are joined for dinner by Martin, an adopted member of the family, Ethan's first words to him are: "Fella could mistake you for a half-breed." Ethan initially extends to Martin a look of utter contempt. Ethan's brother, Aaron, reminds them all that it was Ethan who found the orphaned, infant Martin, but Ethan adamantly and curtly dismisses the event: "Just happened to be me. No need to make more of it." In a genre where American Indians are routinely slaughtered, Ethan's scorn for Martin's ethnicity is appropriate to the racism inherent in the "settling" of the West. We must differentiate between Ethan's racism and that of his times, just as we must separate Ahab's hatred from our modern view of the cruelty of whaling. Just as "the

White Whale represents the beauty, savagery, and mystery of nature” (McLoughlin 63),<sup>25</sup> so too, in the Western, is the Indian seen as just another force of nature, a river to cross, mountains to overcome, heat and cold, draught or famine. To underscore the previous contention, and solidify the comparison between *Moby-Dick* and *The Searchers*, we need only take the following passages from Melville’s opus and substitute the word *whale* with *Indian*, and the name *Ahab* with *Ethan*:

The White Whale swam before him as the monomaniac incarnation of all those malicious agencies which some deep men feel eating in them, till they are left living on with half a heart and half a lung. That intangible malignity which has been from the beginning . . . All that most madness and torments; all that stirs up the lees of things; all truth with malice in it; all that cracks the sinews and cakes the brain; all the subtle demonisms of life and thought; all evil, to crazy Ahab, were visibly personified and made practically assailable in Moby Dick. He piled upon the whale’s white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down. (184)

In the stereotypical Western of classic Hollywood, Indians are NOT the “bad guys,” and the classic Hollywood Western almost always has a “white” villain. It could be argued that to dehumanize is even more racist than to vilify, but Indians in classic Hollywood Westerns “functioned as props, bits of local color, textural effects. As people they had no existence . . . a particularly dangerous form of local wildlife” (Tompkins 8). In a similar sense, the average whaler, unlike Ahab, does not hate the whales that they slaughter. It is simply a necessary action if the cities of the world were to have the necessary oil to run their machinery and light their lamps. Likewise, if the United States was to reach from Atlantic to Pacific, if the West was to be “tamed,” then a certain people whose very lifestyle was anathema to “civilization,” must go, despite any prior claim they may have to the land. However, the whalers’ attitude toward whales

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<sup>25</sup> “The White Whale is the symbol of that persistent force of destruction, that meaningless force, which now figures as the outpouring of a volcano or the atmospheric disruption of a tornado” (Mumford 185).

is not Ahab's and the settlers' view of Indians is not Ethan's. Ethan possesses a visceral hatred for the Indians, just as Ahab does for one very specific whale. Indeed, in a paraphrasing of Ahab, we can see Ethan saying, "be the Indian agent, or be the Indian principle, I will wreak that hate upon him."

All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks . . . some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask . . . That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him. (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 164)

Ahab insinuates that what Starbuck sees as the natural order is a cover for all that impedes and frustrates Man. Starbuck sees nature where Ahab sees evil, just as classic Hollywood portrays Native Americans, not as evil, but as a force of nature. Ethan, however, sees something more. Both Ahab and Ethan are in their respective worlds but not of those worlds.

The struggle with the wilderness, then, is a conflict with "Others," which, in Melville's book and Ford's film, also reveals the battle within the individual. "According to many nationalist myths, the nation is born, or arises, from a painful rite of passage where it has to fight its adversaries; the Other or the enemy within" (Eriksen 139). In *Moby-Dick* and *The Searchers*, the enemy is both out there, nature, but also within Ahab and Ethan, who contend with their inner demons. In *Moby-Dick*, the contorted and distorted individual, Ahab, loses to nature. In so doing, there is a sense that order is restored, even though we know that, in reality, Man ultimately defeats nature—as evidenced by the hunting of whales to near extinction. The dislocated individual in *The Searchers*, Ethan, seems to have defeated the forces of nature—in this case, the Indians—yet he nonetheless cannot join society. In this sense, Ethan, like Ahab, also loses. In George Stevens' 1953 Western *Shane*, the idea of the Western hero not belonging is stressed when the title character states, "There's no living with a killer." Ahab and Ethan are

both killers, killers of natural objects, killers of the natural order, and ultimately killers of their own humanity. Arvin describes Ahab as “the image of murderous destructiveness directed outward against the Other” (170), a description equally appropriate for Ethan.

Ethan’s racism, and its distinction from other settlers, is clearly on display when Ethan shoots out the eyes of a dead Comanche. In so doing, he is indulging the beliefs of the Other, beliefs that he does not even hold. Ahab knows whales as Ethan knows the Indians. The complete understanding of their adversaries is matched only by their hatred.

In the hunter myth, the frontier hero establishes “a spiritual kinship with the Indians,” however, this kinship “makes the hunter more effective as the destroyer of the Indians.” He is the “exorcist of the wilderness’s darkness,” but this destruction ultimately makes him obsolete, and “his final atonement with society may take the form of a voluntary exile. (Slotkin *Regeneration* 563)

After Ethan shoots out the eyes of the dead Indian, the Reverend, unable to comprehend such an act, asks, “What good did that do ya?” Ethan replies, “By what you preach, none. By what that Comanche believes . . . ain’t got no eyes, he can’t enter the spirit-land. Has to wander forever between the winds. You get it Reverend.” This indeed is a level of animus that goes beyond even our common notions of racism. Ethan does not believe what the Indians believe, but in order to strike at them in their deepest held convictions, he is willing to “play in their ballpark.”

The greatest distinguishing element of Ethan’s racism is his fear of miscegeny. This issue certainly predates cinema: “Two of [James Fenimore] Cooper’s consistent concerns . . . race and women” demonstrate a moral duality which can be seen “to be so characteristic of the American literary imagination” (Porte 8). At one point in the story, Ethan reveals that when he was separated from the search party, he found the dead body of the oldest girl. Ethan is asked, “Was she . . . did they...?” Within the propriety of a 1956 film, the word *rape* is not used, and a



distraught Ethan responds, “What do you want me to do, draw you a picture?” Now, the deepest level of Ethan’s hatred is revealed. He searches for the girls not just to bring them home but to save them from a fate worse than death. With the search now reduced to the youngest girl, Debbie, Ethan grouses through a tight jaw, “They’ll keep her to raise as one of their own, until she’s of an age to...” His words again trail off, the subject being unspeakable. Ethan’s all-consuming motivation is as old as the earliest Narrative Captivities in American literature. Slotkin points out that the myth of the captive narrative contradicts reality in the sense that the quest of rescuing the “intact” captive conflicts with the fact that ex-captives often became outcasts once they were “rescued.” “The woman is only the nominal objective or excuse. His [the hero’s] true and only objective is to kill the Indian” (*Gunfighter* 467). Slotkin forgets that there is a more decided objective on the part of Ethan, and it is arguably as racist as genocide, albeit not as violent, and that is his desire to prevent miscegenation. The point is a significant one in that, like Ahab’s loss of a leg, the murder and abduction of Ethan’s relatives is only a pretense for a deeper purpose, the war against the something “from behind the unreasoning mask” (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 164). Rescuing Debbie and slaughtering Moby Dick are only superficial quests and we are left to wonder, as Ahab does, or perhaps more accurately, as Melville does, if there may be “naught beyond” (*Moby-Dick* 164). The members of the original search party, and eventually only Martin, pursue the Indians to get the girls back safe, just as normal whalers pursue whale oil. Ethan and Ahab have deeper purposes. They pursue that which lies “beyond the masque,” their own internal concept of evil. Not realizing, or simply not caring, about the evil they may be fostering within themselves.

The most revealing miscegenistic moment for Ethan is when he and Martin visit the Calvary fort where the army holds female captives retrieved from the Indians. The women sit on the floor exhibiting various displays of lunacy. Their catatonic behavior leads one of the soldiers to comment, “Hard to believe they’re white.” Ethan’s response, repugnant to our modern sensibilities, is “They ain’t white no more.” Ethan begins to leave the room but stops and glares back at the afflicted ex-captives. The camera dollies in on his anguished and angered face. His scowl, like Ahab’s, is demented with rage. The camera move is extremely intrusive and joined with Ethan’s expression is unnerving. The move is reminiscent of the move Ford employs to first introduce John Wayne in *Stagecoach*, and while reminding us of the original Western hero’s image, it also forces us to realize to where that image has evolved or, if you prefer, devolved. Despite the undeniable Hawksian connection to the evolved and more complex Western hero, this is a perfect example why this darker Western hero correctly belongs to Ford. Ford, more than any other director, gave us the original visual of the Western hero, it is totally appropriate that he present this enigmatic update. Ethan’s racist declaration, in one sense, reminds us of, “Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I’d strike the sun if it insulted me” (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 164). Both characters’ hate because of an unnatural view of existence and the proper relationship between Man and Nature, and by extension, between humans as well.

Indeed, it should be noted that the whale and its whiteness have been seen by some as not representing the sublimity of nature, but rather the destructiveness of “whiteness,” the detrimental side of Western civilization. One such evaluation states:

Melville was in quest not of the white whale alone but of white ideology—that is, the assumptions governing the imperial venture that, in its contradictory combination of virtue and vice, asserted and sought to extend European and American empire. *Moby-Dick* showed the Euro-American world in contention with others—the world of enslaved

Africans, the diverse world of American Indians, and not least the entire ecological world that was being harnessed to new machines of industry. (Sundquist 9)

Ishmael even when seeming to praise those not of the White “race,” does so in a backhanded way. “It’s only his outside; a man can be honest in any sort of skin. But then, what to make of his unearthly complexion” (*Moby-Dick* 21). Ishmael describes Queequeg as being in a liminal state, but his comparison seems to have a bias toward one side of that transformation, “Queequeg . . . was a creature in the transition state—neither caterpillar nor butterfly. He was just enough civilized to show off his outlandishness in the strangest possible manner” (27). We have seen how Ethan Edwards views such a liminal state in his early treatment of Martin, who, as a “half-breed,” is, like Queequeg, in a liminal state. In a similar tongue-in-cheek manner, Melville states, “There was a certain lofty bearing about the Pagan, which even his uncouthness could not altogether maim” (50). Although there are many such passages that seem to hint at Melville’s championing of the “White” cause, Melville is always aware of the symbiotic nature of Good and Evil:

This pre-eminence in it [whiteness] applies to the human race itself; giving the white man ideal mastership over every dusky tribe . . . yet for all these accumulated associations, with whatever is sweet, and honourable, and sublime, there yet lurks an elusive something in the innermost idea of this hue, which strikes more of a panic to the soul than redness which affrights in blood . . . that ghastly whiteness . . . which imparts such an abhorrent mildness. (*Moby-Dick* 189)

Moreover, this racial polarity is likewise a part of the myth of the West. “Wild Western images are used to establish the incantation of whiteness, the sinister blend of majesty and terror” (H. Smith 79).

The previous statement reinforces the ambiguity of symbolism. Melville is concerned with the problematic nature of symbols. “Whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence

of color and at the same time the concrete of all colors . . . a dumb blankness, full of meaning” (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 195). Melville, and for that matter Hawthorne as well, employ the seemingly realistic as symbols, as venues, for exploration of deeper meaning. Do physical attributes represent anything beyond physical reality? Both *The Searchers* and *Moby-Dick* play with the idea that the evil inherent in nature manifests itself visually. The Comanche who has taken Debbie is named “Scar” for the obvious reason that he has a scar on his face. This could well be the film’s attempt to say that despite the American Indian’s superficial relationship to nature, beneath actually hides not nature but evil, just as Ahab feels the crooked jaw of *Moby-Dick* does.<sup>26</sup> However, given Melville’s belief in the weakness of symbolism, we may doubt the malevolence of *Moby Dick* and believe instead that his “wrinkled brow and crooked jaw” are not representative of anything and neither does Scar’s scar represented the villainy of the Comanche warrior. The ambiguity of Romantic symbols neither indicates nor denies whatever might lie beneath.

As stated previously, heroism, and for that matter villainy as well, is a question of perspective and one moment in *The Searchers* underscores this subjectivity. At one point, Ethan and Martin come upon an Indian encampment where the women and children have been slaughtered by the Cavalry. This kind of “white” atrocity is previously unknown in a Hollywood Western, and a particularly pointed condemnation for Ford, who created a trilogy—*Fort Apache* (1948), *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949) and *Rio Grande* (1950)—glorifying the Cavalry. So, while Ethan is meant to be seen as a particularly twisted personality, we are reminded that his

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<sup>26</sup> “Nor was it his unwonted magnitude, nor his remarkable hue, nor yet his deformed lower jaw, that so much invested the whale with natural terror, as that unexampled, intelligent malignity which, according to specific accounts, he had over and over again evinced in his assaults” (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 183).

seemingly barbaric actions are in fact perpetrated by the more “civilized” forces of westward expansion as well. Likewise, Ahab’s apparent bloodlust seems insane, yet the industry he is part of produces wholesale slaughter of whales on a regular basis. Furthermore, we must begin to ask if Scar’s slaughter at the beginning of the film is analogous to the sins of “civilization.” In this case, Ethan’s hatred and Scar’s hatred are mirror impulses. If so, then perhaps Ethan sees himself in Scar and Ahab also sees himself in Moby Dick.

To approach an answer as to the true nature of heroism in *Moby-Dick* and *The Searchers*, it needs to be realized that the character of Martin Pawley is comparable to both Starbuck and Ishmael. Obviously, Martin, like Ishmael, is the one through whose eyes we live this tale. This connection between Ishmael and Martin is made even clearer when Martin begins to narrate, via letters home, a large portion of their quest. However, as the yin to Ethan’s yang, Martin is also analogous to the role served by Starbuck. In a brief side story, something the *Moby-Dick* narrative is not averse to, Martin describes an event which he admits he cannot understand, much like Ishmael’s comprehension often fails him. Martin and Ethan come upon a herd of buffalo and Ethan begins to shoot all of them. Martin tries to stop him, but, as usual, Ethan cannot be stopped. Ethan intends that the buffalo be unavailable as food for the Indians that they are trailing. This is a true destructive conforming of nature to myopic, individual self-interest. This reminds us that Ahab sees his pursuit of Moby Dick as superseding the ship’s purpose of bringing home as much whale oil as possible. This point, however, also reminds us, despite his Ishmael-like role as first-person narrator, that Martin projects a viewpoint more reminiscent of Starbuck. In any case, Martin, Ishmael and even Starbuck all seem incapable of completely resisting their charismatic leader. Tony Tanner points out that two characters, common to the

epic format, are a secondary hero, who is like us, and the major hero, who is distanced from us and from all (x). However, the heroism of Ishmael, even a secondary one, is not clear cut:

There occur (as Ishmael sees it) two dangerous alternative conditions. On the one hand: an empty innocence, a tenacious ignorance of evil, which, granted the tough nature of reality, must be either immaturity or spiritual cowardice. On the other: a sense of evil so inflexible, so adamant in its refusal to admit the not less reducible fact of existent good that it is perilously close to a love of evil, a queer pact with the devil. (Lewis 132)

The last line of the above observation is the very essence of both Ahab and Ethan and as such it leaves us with an Ishmael who, like Martin, is insignificant without a man of action like Ahab or Ethan—that seems insufficient to categorize either Ishmael or Martin as heroes.

A further deficiency in Martin, Ishmael, and even Starbuck, at least in terms of the already-mentioned masculinity of the Western hero, is they lack the restraint of emotions that their leaders possess. Restraint of emotion is the price required for getting the job done. The Western hero must undergo what Tompkins calls the “mortification of feeling” (215). Tompkins description is also pertinent to Ahab:

The need for an outward display of strength and independence on the hero’s part is so strong an element in Westerns that it controls virtually every aspect of the genre, especially the hero’s relation to other human beings. He shows his independence through the successful domination of other men. (145)

The most apparent manifestation of this stoicism on the part of the westerner is his tight-lipped reticence. Although Ahab is given to moments of verbosity, he also displays “his ambiguous, half-hinting, half-revealing, shroud sort of talk” (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 93). Ahab, in his duality, is both given to wordy discourse as well as extend periods of reclusiveness. In this, Ahab is similar to the taciturn Western hero. Concerning this aspect of the westerner, Tompkins tells us, “There is very little free expression of the emotions. The hero is a man of few words who expresses himself through physical action” (39). Here is the connection between a lack of

emotion and violence that dominates Ethan Edwards and, to perhaps a lesser extent, Ahab. “Forced to confront death on a regular basis, the hero steels himself against all emotions and perceptions that do not lead directly to his conquering” (Tompkins 218). The opposite disposition is exemplified by Martin who does not possess the restraint necessary to deal with the realized probability of an Indian attack. He rushes back toward the homestead despite Ethan’s warning that the horses must be fed and rested first. What seems on the part of Ethan to be callousness is pragmatism, yet we see in his face, a level of emotion that John Wayne is seldom called upon to demonstrate in movies. He too wishes to race back, but he knows what must be done. It is the closeup of Ethan unsaddling his horse and looking after the departing Martin that shows the emotion which seethes beneath the traditionally stoic Western hero. Martin for his impetuosity ends up afoot and Ethan returns to the homestead ahead of him. The will to do what must be done is what delineates the epic Western hero from those around him. It is also the characteristic that the genre forefronts in a general depiction of masculine valor and that classic Hollywood promoted as key to the identity of the American male.

As suggested previously, this stoicism fosters the premise that the dominant emotion, with which both Ahab and Ethan must contend, is their suffering. Like Ahab, Ethan has “a crucifixion in his face” (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 124). There is an unspoken, yet visually suggested, backstory with Ethan, which brings a personal tragedy to his rage and mirrors Ahab’s angst. In the case of Ethan, he has not had his leg taken by an adversarial force, but his last remnants of a family, including a woman with whom, we are led to believe, he was once in love. This is suggested by the restrained embrace between Ethan and his sister-in-law, both when he first returns and later when he departs with the Reverend and deputized Rangers. We also see

her, in a moment of solitude, fondling Ethan's coat. Her choice must have been to marry the more steadfast brother over the roving spirit that was Ethan. In a similarly constrained manner, in one of his more human moments, Ahab relates the family connections he has left behind (543-44). The life of any whaler, or Ethan, is not conducive to domestic life, but when an obsessive quest for revenge takes over, the call of family and home grows even fainter. When Ethan returns to the homestead after the Comanche raid, he finds his brother, his sister-in-law, and their son murdered and the two girls carried off. The moments of catastrophe for both Ahab and Ethan lead not only to a relentless quest for revenge but arguably also into a state of dementia. Melville makes clear the close relationship between suffering and insanity, "His torn body and gashed soul bled into one another; and so interfusing, made him mad" (*Moby-Dick* 185). Yet it is impossible to separate these attributes from the heroism of both figures. "Grief and Greatness, suffering and heroism: these were to Melville, inseparable" (Geist 44), and "through his suffering Ahab is ennobled . . . suffering and heroism were concomitant . . . Melville would leave no doubts of Ahab's magnificence" (Geist 47). Indeed, Martin never seems capable of separating his great respect for Ethan from that "something" in Ethan's eyes that he associates with insanity. Whether these two protagonists are mad is, of course, as so many elements of this book and this film, debatable. Mumford reminds us that Ahab's outlandish pride is easily perceived as insanity, "There is madness in that pride, the madness of a tormented soul" (165). Ishmael seems to concur with Mumford when he states, "There is a wisdom that is woe; but there is a woe that is madness" (425). If indeed Ahab and Ethan are insane, Melville reminds us that it is a universal human affliction, since, "There is no folly of the beasts of the earth which is not infinitely outdone by the madness of men" (*Moby-Dick* 385).



The one emotion that neither Ethan nor Ahab ever hide is their hatred, and it is this emotion that dictates their ultimate fate. Even at his final moment, Ahab curses, “To the last I grapple with thee; from Hell’s heart I stab at thee; for hate’s sake I spit my last breath at thee.” (571-72). When Ethan finally finds Debbie, he prepares to kill her. His sole reason, “She’s been living with a Buck.” Martin and a Comanche attack prevent him from doing the murder. Lest we think that Ethan’s blind hatred is solely a male province, strictly the product of a patriarchal society, it should be noted what happens when Ethan and Martin return home briefly before their final attempt to defeat Scar. The girl who has been waiting so long for Martin to return has given up and is getting ready to marry someone else. She has never understood the quest. When Martin tells her that he is leaving again with Ethan, her anger and frustration is more than that of just a woman who has been waiting too long for her man. When Martin says he must go, she responds, “It’s too late. She’s a woman grown now.” When Martin says that he must fetch Debbie home, his long-patient girlfriend says, “Fetch what home? The leavings of a Comanche Buck?” With fire in her eyes that matches Ethan’s, she tells Martin not only what he already knows, that Ethan will put a bullet in Debbie’s brain, but also her own evaluation that Debbie’s mother would have wanted him to.

The temporal and emotional climax of *The Searchers*, however, provides what at first seems a deviation from *Moby-Dick*. Ethan brutishly tracks down Debbie, while Martin futilely rushes to catch up and prevent Ethan from killing her. However, in Ethan’s moment of “stabbing from hell’s heart,” unlike Ahab, he relents, takes up his niece in his arms and poignantly says, “Let’s go home, Debbie.” Interestingly, this highly dramatic moment is shot from inside a cave, shooting out at the landscape, much like the very opening shot of the film, with Ethan and

Debbie playing out this instance of pathos in the “doorway.” Just like the doorway in the opening shot visually suggesting a portal, a liminal space between civilization and the wilderness, the cave opening suggests a threshold of nature and something beyond, some other layer of existence that is neither wilderness or civilization. Despite any superficial divergence in narrative conclusion, this moment is quintessential Melville.

Like all American Romanticism, the exact meaning of the endings of both *The Searchers* and *Moby-Dick* are ambiguous and call into question the value of the symbol. Is Ethan’s change of heart merely classic Hollywood’s need for a happy ending? Does it ruin the comparison between *The Searchers* and *Moby-Dick*? The answer to the first question is most probably *yes*. Although the film certainly breaks many barriers, a fatalistic finale might well have been one iconoclasm too many. However, it is the assertion of this chapter that the answer to the second question is a resounding *no*. Even though Ethan does not follow his quest for vengeance to his own demise, his bitterness and monomaniacal hatred has left him unfit for life among what remains of his family.<sup>27</sup> The last shot is a duplicate of the first, through the doorway of a homestead, dark inside, bright expanse of nature outside. Debbie, Martin, Martin’s girl and her parents, all enter the house, but Ethan can only watch them. He then turns, the same isolated figure he began as, and walks away from civilization, swallowed up by the wilderness as Ahab is by the ocean. “Having hardened himself to do murder, he can no longer open his heart to humankind” (Tompkins 220). Ahab fails. Ethan only succeeds because he relents in his obstinacy and utters, “Let’s go home, Debbie.” This is the cry that never comes from Ahab. Just

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<sup>27</sup> It can also be argued that both Ford’s film and Melville’s book end with the suggestion of redemption. Both Martin and Ishmael survive their descent into the hero’s world of madness and hate, and are able to retain their humanity despite their proximity to derangement.

the opposite, to the very last Ahab's relentlessness is clear. Ethan, however, is no less a tragic figure. "The Western hero's silence symbolizes a massive suppression of the inner life. And my sense is that this determined shutting down of emotions, this cutting off the self from contact with the interior well of feeling, exacts its price in the end" (Tompkins 66). In both Ahab and Ethan, extreme individualism precludes the normality of home. The price may be death, in the case of Ahab, or ostracization, in the case of Ethan, but, in either conclusion, it is a total displacement, that which Melville calls "the desolation of solitude" (*Moby-Dick* 543). As suggested earlier, "heroes" ultimately do not belong anywhere.

Can a disregard for the bonds of what nature and society dictate, actually be seen as a strength, and more specifically an American strength? In *The Searchers* and *Moby-Dick*, "the instinctive need for order and meaning seems mainly to be confronted by meaninglessness and disorder . . . goodness and evil, beneficence and destructiveness, light and darkness, seem bafflingly intermixed" (Arvin 183). There is certainly a ruthlessness that, undeniably trampled many, but resulted in a nation, whose use or misuse of Nature, created a power in the New World that was eventually the only force that could save the Old World from itself.<sup>28</sup> This is the national dichotomy as embraced by both Melville and Ford.

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<sup>28</sup> Winston Churchill's famous speech to the House of Commons on June 4, 1940.

## CONCLUSION

Clearly Early American Literature invites us to examine two seemingly dichotomous attributes: transatlanticism and American exceptionalism. Equally obvious is that a mutualistic approach, involving both attributes, also applies in the study of classic Hollywood cinema. The commonalities between these two formative venues confer a greater understanding of each. In both mediums, and in both epochs, transnational and transtemporal influences exist side by side with an undeniable effort to employ an art form in the establishment of a nationalistic identity. In Chapter One, we saw that this blending or hybridization exists at the basic level of language. EAL, especially as represented by Nathaniel Hawthorne, exploits an existing genre, the romance, and infuses it with characteristics that create a unique form of fiction. Similarly, classic Hollywood codified various film techniques into a set of standards that became the very “grammar” of cinema. If the comparison between EAL and classic Hollywood is to be maintained, the issue of Romanticism must be addressed, and in Chapter Two, one aspect of Romanticism, flight from one’s situation into an idealized state, was shown to be a major attribute in both periods and both art forms. This connection is apparent even when comparing two opposites: a Romantic who went in search of perfection outside America—Washington Irving, and one that found it within America—Frank Capra. Chapter Three established the exploitation of literature and film, specifically the biography genre, arguably to propagandistic proportions, to mold and shape national identity. Lastly, an in-depth examination of the very nature of that national identity, its myths and realities, its negative and positive attributes, was featured in Chapter Four.

Although this dissertation argues that national exceptionalism and transnationalism are equally indispensable for understanding 1760-1860 in EAL and 1930-1960 in classic Hollywood, the mutuality of these two approaches is not without controversy. For example, Sacvan Bercovitch, whose 1975 and 1978 works on early Puritan influences contributed immensely to defining national identity, would, by 1986, see a nationalistic approach as utterly replaceable.

To re-see American literature in an international perspective...will alter our very concept of 'Americanness' by recontextualizing it . . . by replacing the tautologies of exceptionalism with the transnational categories of gender, class and race. ("Problem" 652)

Ralph Bauer echoes that sentiment when he characterizes transatlanticism as "taking an important step in rescaling the significance of the U.S. within a truly hemispheric context" ("Early" 229), and Paul Giles sees this new approach as a tool which "can perform useful work, demystifying myths of American exceptionalism" (*Global* 265). Schueller & Watts even see exceptionalism and transatlanticism as warring factions:

Each side share a desire to stabilize a knowable and singularized notion of "American" experience, racial identity, history and power rooted in its adherence to or divergence from a knowable and singularized notion of "European" experience history and identity. (3)<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, despite variations in transatlanticism, Donald Pease sees one unifying characteristic:

Over the last twenty years, multiple and contradictory versions of transnational American studies have appeared . . . The only ideological conviction that these disparate Americanists share is the fierce opposition to American exceptionalism. ("Introduction" 17)

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<sup>1</sup> This comment should sound familiar. This dissertation has described classical Hollywood film as a singularized "notion" which invites both "adherence" and "divergence." This dissertation also suggests that both American cinema and American literature possess a core standard which produces a traditional canon, but to see exceptionalism and transnationalism as mutually exclusive, should also warn us that attempts to widen a canon do so at a price. Schueller and Watts issue just such a warning; that "to reexamine the role of...excluded groups in our redefinition of 'early America'...is to challenge the oversimplifications implicit in older constructions of 'exceptionalism'" (4). The question then arises, as the Introduction hints, whether an endlessly flexible canon is any canon at all.

The evolution of transatlanticism from a mutual approach to an eradicating force is best demonstrated in the development of one literary critic in particular, Paul Giles. In 2002, he wrote, “To reconsider American literature and culture in a transnational context, then, is not to abandon the idea of nationalism, but to reimagine it as a virtual construction, a residual narrative rather than a unifying social power” (Giles, *Virtual* 20). Notice, however, the change in his attitude between 2002 and 2006: “As a formal method of inquiry, transnationalism . . . serves to reveal the parameters of national systems and so to hollow out their pressing, peremptory claims to legitimacy” (Giles, *Atlantic* 5). Increasing frames of reference, as transatlanticism does, is always helpful to any academic endeavor, but it should not, because of a fear of promoting “privileged frames of reference,” eliminate the notion that there are certain voices which are unique and critical to the creation of a specific cultural identity. Clearly in American cinema not all influences are equal. For example, German Expressionism is not as essential to understanding American cinema as are the basic grammatical contributions of D. W. Griffith.<sup>2</sup>

The controversial nature of American exceptionalism extends far beyond literature and film. In 2011, in the *Cornell International Affairs Review*, Timothy Borjian states that “excessive national pride . . . causes arrogance” (30). This is not contrary to the depiction of national identity in Chapter Four, as arrogance is certainly a key characteristic of both Ahab and Ethan Edwards. Borjian admits that there may be such a thing as American uniqueness. To do otherwise would be to deny the observations of de Tocqueville and others, but Borjian’s error is to make the term analogous to seeing other nations and cultures as inferior. “The notion of American exceptionalism . . . is interchangeable with American superiority” (Borjian 26). While

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<sup>2</sup> See pp. 2-3, 27-29 and 57.

such a connection is certainly possible, it is by no means axiomatic. Nonetheless, Borjian feels that “when American politicians proclaim that their country is exceptional, they are thus suggesting that U.S. policies are the best and that other nations’ are inferior” (28). This is no doubt the reason so many literary critics are uncomfortable with, and even hateful toward, this concept.

As Borjian’s opinions suggest, the concept of American exceptionalism is a hotly debated topic to this day. For instance, in 2009, Barack Obama was asked if he believed in American exceptionalism. His response was: “I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism.” This comment might well be simple diplomacy or it may reveal an underlining philosophy of cultural equivalency. Does America hold a unique place in the world and in history or not? Conservative minds were unhappy with the first part of the President’s answer, but they should have taken heart from what he said next:

I think that we have a core set of values that are enshrined in our Constitution, in our body of law, in our democratic practices, in our belief in free speech and equality that, though imperfect, are exceptional. (“President’s News Conference”)

Obama went even further two years later, when he seemed to be echoing John Winthrop’s “shinning city” when he stated that “America [is] not just a place on a map, but the light to the world” (“Address Before”). Obviously, the issue of American exceptionalism is still central to the national conversation. In fact, both the election of Donald Trump and Brexit suggest that national exceptionalism itself has even become transatlantic. This dissertation asserts that in the world of politics, one is free to embrace or reject the notion of exceptionalism, but in academic exploration no perspective is dispensable. To approach EAL or classic Hollywood from both a

national and transnational view is “but a draught,” a single perspective would be a “draught of a draught” (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 145).

As with any academic investigation, the question arises, what, if any, significance this specific examination in literature and film has beyond its period of focus. The transatlantic aspects of American literature do not end at 1860, and cinema has become more transnational than ever. For example, in the late nineteenth century, author Henry James, American born but living his adult life in England, demonstrated not only the transatlantic view of community, but also that such influence could flow across the Atlantic in either direction. Furthermore, by comparing and contrasting British and American society, James was not only highlighting cultural differences, but also suggesting a kind of mutualism. In addition, between the two World Wars, a period Claude-Edmonde Magny refers to as “the age of the American novel,” many saw the French novel as becoming greatly influenced by American literature, Magny asserts that actually both the French and the American novel had become equally influenced by a “film aesthetic” (3-33), a cinematic realism typified by Hemingway and Faulkner.

Transatlanticism in cinema is also conspicuously alive in modern American film. Not only, as we have seen, did classic Hollywood devour British literature as source material, but beyond our period of concern, certain individuals in film developed a Henry James-like quality of national fluidity. This does not just manifest itself in a wider marketing spectrum than existed in classic Hollywood, but in transatlantic acting careers. While Michael Redgrave was almost unknown to American audiences, Richard Burton’s film career was mostly American and Laurence Olivier achieved a middle ground with a well-established screen presence on both sides of the Atlantic. Today, actors and actresses from Great Britain not only appear abundantly in



American films, but they regularly play American characters, as “dropping one’s accent” has become a common talent. Directors can also be as transatlantic as actors. Is David Lean an English filmmaker or an American one? Moreover, in a Jamesian fashion, Stanley Kubrick demonstrated that the transatlantic flow was bidirectional.

The transatlantic nature of post-classic Hollywood is also evident in individual productions. The 1957 film *The Bridge on the River Kwai* could well be seen as the first transatlantic composition. It was directed by David Lean, British, and produced by Sam Spiegel, American. Furthermore, screen time is shared almost equally between Alec Guinness (at that time a strictly British actor) and Hollywood staple William Holden. The film was also an obvious transition from classic studio production to independent filmmaking. Such examples would become more and more common. The 1968 film version of the musical *Oliver!* was directed by Carol Reed, almost unknown to American audiences, and features an exclusively British cast, none of whom had appeared in an American film. The film was produced entirely in England and its source was an English stage musical written by Lionel Bart and first opened in London’s West End in 1960 – not to mention the original literary source material. Yet, this film is often listed as an American film. Why? The answer is often simply that it was produced with American dollars. Today, the British Academy Awards consists almost entirely of nominations that are American in origin. Furthermore, in terms of source material, in the last twenty-five years, almost every work of Austen, Dickens and the Brontes has been adapted to both an American theatrical film release and a BBC-produced television version. The theoretical notion of a single, transatlantic, literary community between 1760 and 1860, “imagined,” as Benedict Anderson would say, or not, has obviously become a modern reality in the cinematic community.

Nationalistic elements would be harder to recognize in the post-classical era of American cinema. The patriotic fervor associated with a film like *Sergeant York* would be almost impossible to find by the late 1960s. An ever-increasing cultural cynicism replaced the sentimentality of Frank Capra. This change was accompanied by post-colonial, postmodern, multicultural sentiments that increasingly governed post-classical films and contain, among other anti-establishment sentiments, a strong cynicism of nationalism. The rejection of patriotic fervor in modern American cinema, although certainly wedded to the Viet Nam era, nonetheless had its origins in much earlier anti-war sentiments in movies. In 1957, Stanley Kubrick directed the strongly anti-war film *Paths of Glory* long before anti-war sentiments would become as prevalent as they would by the late 1960s. The film's anti-jingoistic theme, demonstrated by the main character, Colonel Dax's (Kirk Douglas) quoting of Samuel Johnson's remark that patriotism was "the last refuge of a scoundrel," painted the French military in such a bad light that the French government did not allow the film to be shown in France until 1975. While the independently produced *Paths of Glory* was able, for the most part, to pass under the radar in America—due to its independently produced, low-budget, and art-house cinematic techniques—in the same year, the major production of *The Bridge on the River Kwai* also tackled anti-war attitudes. The American screenwriters of *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, Carl Foreman and Michael Wilson, were blacklisted in Hollywood at the time and wrote the script in Great Britain. This last fact not only furthers the transatlantic nature of this film but also calls into deeper consideration issues of patriotism. Still, those elements of the film that highlight the stupidity of war can also be seen as anti-British, post-colonial commentary. This would, of course, make the film much more palatable to American audiences than any more blatant suggestion that

American war efforts could ever be misguided. The last observation is underscored by another 1957 film also set in World War II, a seemingly more traditional war movie, *The Enemy Below*. This very typical war story might well have gone unnoticed had it not been for the extreme controversy that arose from its sympathetic portrayal of a German U-boat commander. Only twelve years after the end of World War II, American audiences were not ready for any understanding depiction of a Nazi. Still, the film trumpets, as all American war films did since Pearl Harbor, not only war as a good thing but Americans at war as the good guys. The table had been set, however, by both *Paths of Glory* and *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, for a much more cynical approach to war which American cinema would soon embrace. Yet even concepts such as anti-war, which became a cornerstone of post-classic Hollywood, would eventually be re-evaluated by a film like *Saving Private Ryan* (1998). The director of this war film, Steven Spielberg, who by his own admission was raised on classic Hollywood, regenerated heroic warriors and once again reignited the issue of American exceptionalism.

As stated earlier, the shift in American cinema was not only a shift in cultural attitudes but also a rejection of classic cinema form and content. Just as the romance became much darker in the hands of Hawthorne and Melville, and in British literature, Romanticism gave way to Realism, in a similar manner, Hollywood, by the late sixties, began to spurn sentimentality on the screen, and, thanks to the influence of French and Italian film styles, began to reject tradition narrative structure. Not only did films like *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Cool Hand Luke*, and *The Graduate* (all 1967), challenge, as Melville had, notions of who the “good guys” are, but films like *The Last Picture Show* (1971), *Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice* (1969), and *Five Easy Pieces* (1970) also mixed moral ambiguity with plots that, in a Bordwellian classic sense, were

not even identifiable. These films, examples of what is called the “New Hollywood,” exhibit a cynicism that, while not the overt darkness of film noir, definitely possess a thematic, narrative and even visual nihilism that movies of the Hollywood era never did. “I am horror-struck at this antemosaic, unsourced existence of the unspeakable terrors of the whale, which have been before all time, must needs exist after all humane ages are over” (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 457). In the previous passage, Melville seems to see “evil” as outlasting the futile struggles of “heroes” like Ahab, but, true to Romantic ambiguity, Ishmael also sees the crusader as indomitable: “Thou all-destroying but unconquering whale” (Melville, *Moby-Dick* 571). The ambiguity of the struggle is at the heart of the flawed nature of American exceptionalism and is essential to a post-Viet Nam, post-Watergate restructured natural identity. Modern existentialism and moral ambiguity, easily attributed to *Moby-Dick* and *The Searchers*, would come to dominate social attitudes of the second half of the twentieth century and certainly of the New Hollywood.

Yet even in this post-modern epoch, film, as David Bordwell suggests, could not completely abandon its classical heritage. No matter what success these “new” films might have had, classic Hollywood would return to claim its preeminence in 1977. It was the unmatched phenomenon of *Star Wars* that showed a hunger for a return to traditional cinema. In this film, audiences voted, through the box-office, that despite Viet Nam and Watergate, that beyond social movements based on racial and gender, or perhaps because of these elements, that the public still wanted movies to have clear definitions of heroes and villains and classic Hollywood narratives. There was a time when critically acclaimed films were also the top box-office draws, but the New Hollywood created two lists, ever increasingly exclusive to one another – critics and awards praising one group of films and the box office another – a condition that exists until this very

day.<sup>3</sup> Just as American literary studies became two camps, exceptionalism and transnationalism, the New Hollywood became, and remains, either artistically acclaimed or popular, but seldom both. The cynical, if not outright nihilistic, tendencies that American films adopted in the late 1960s are still the majority of the critically acclaimed and awarded films today.

The Introduction of this dissertation depicts the effort, on the part of Hollywood, to employ government and college entities to validate the cultural significance of American movies. The language that connected cinema with democracy in the early twentieth century sounds much like the expectations of American literature a century earlier:

Civilization, all through the history of mankind, has been chiefly the property of the upper classes, but during the past century civilization has been permeating steadily downward. The leaders of the democratic movement have been general education, universal suffrage, cheap periodicals and cheap travel. Today the moving picture machine cannot be overlooked as an effective protagonist of democracy. (Patterson 10)

Garth Jowett sees the period as one in which not only had mass communications made the American nation a closer knit entity, but a more homogenous one as well. Those who reject the notion of “melting pot” would disagree with Jowett’s characterization, nonetheless, the idea of

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<sup>3</sup> In the 1950’s, the New York Film Critics Circle award for Best Picture of the year ranked in the Top 10 box-office grossers of the year eight times (and seven times in the Top 5). In the 1960’s, the New York critics’ choice was in the Top 10 at the box-office six times and twice more in the Top 20. (It would certainly have been seven times, but a newspaper strike in 1962 canceled the awards and no doubt either *Lawrence of Arabia* or *To Kill a Mockingbird* would have won and both were in the Top 10 that year). In the seventies, five best pictures according to the New York critics made the top 10 box office draws, with one more in the top 20. In the eighties, one film made the Top 10 and 4 more in the top 20. In the 1990’s, three films were in the Top 10, but no other films were in even in the Top 20 and two critics’ choices as best picture of the year were not even in the top 50 money-makers. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, the box office rankings for the New York Film Critics Circle’s best film of the year were, in chronological order: 15<sup>th</sup>, 137<sup>th</sup>, 121<sup>st</sup>, 1<sup>st</sup>, 40<sup>th</sup>, 22<sup>nd</sup>, 96<sup>th</sup>, 36<sup>th</sup>, 89<sup>th</sup> and 116<sup>th</sup> (boxofficemojo.com and nyfcc.com).

what it meant to be an American certainly became more concretized (Jowett 4-7), and American film, to many, was becoming synonymous with democracy itself:

This is the marvel of motion pictures: it is art democratic, art for the race. It is in a way a new universal language, even more elemental than music, for it is the telling of a story...through pictures...the masses of mankind...[are] kindled with wonder...[the viewer] begins to feel himself a brother in a race that is led by many dreams. ("In the Interpreter's House" 105).

In the early part of the twentieth century, a similar nationalistic effort was underway to incorporate American literature into academic studies. Both efforts appealed to democratic sensibilities. In a 1912 address to the NEA, Joseph Fulk said, "The public school and the moving-picture show seem to be the only truly democratic institutions in the United States" (457). Thus is the effort to exploit an art form for national identity an ever-reoccurring event.

It is the cornerstone of this dissertation, the concept of hybridization, that makes the "marriage" of contradictions possible, uniting literature and film, realism and formalism, heroism and villainy, as well as national fervor and international perspective. When Ralph Waldo Emerson in 1837 wrote that "our age is ocular" (*Journals* 5:328), he certainly laid the groundwork for American Romanticism's obsession with symbols and underscored the transcendentalist emphasis on personal experience, but he also gives a mantra that fits not only the literature of his period but also one appropriate to the age of classic cinema, when film would become the dominate form of communication for the entire world. In that sense, both EAL and classic Hollywood can be summarized as a march from localism, to nationalism, to internationalism—a movement that has restarted itself several times.

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