

# American fiction

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*My project investigated how the Frontier provided a complex imaginative framework for American fiction in the period between the 1820s and 1850s. I examined major fictional works by mid-nineteenth-century Anglo-American authors within the broader historical context of US westward expansion and empire building, in their relation to the political and social discourses of the time: the ideology of Manifest Destiny, as well as attitudes regarding race- and gender-relations in a period when the United States acquired its continental territory. I studied the work of James Fenimore Cooper, Edgar Allan Poe and Herman Melville in the larger context of the popular literature and culture of the period, revealing how these authors responded to the social and economic changes, as well as to the political compromises and conflicts of mid-nineteenth-century United States. My assumption was that these middle-class Anglo-American authors, while they had individual agendae that ran counter to some of the tenets of mainstream politics and culture, actively contributed to the rhetoric of empire-building. While they struggled to dismantle some of the boundaries that were dividing the social spheres according to class, race and gender, they were also reinforcing these same boundaries by participating in a cultural discourse produced by power.*

During the period between January and May 2010 I was a Fulbright visiting lecturer at the Department of English and Creative Writing at the State University of New York, Oswego. I was accompanied by my seventeen-year-old younger son Zoltán Bartók who attended Oswego High School throughout the period of our stay in the US. My professional obligations were the teaching of a senior seminar in American Studies as well as doing library research connected to my project “Breaking and Building Boundaries: Mid-Nineteenth-Century American Literature and the Discourses of Empire” with the professional assistance of Professor David Hill, a specialist in nineteenth-century American literature and culture. Also, in the course of my visit I was invited to give several public lectures in Oswego NY and at other universities in the US.

## 1. Teaching and Research

The course I taught at SUNY Oswego was a senior seminar (Eng 465) with the title “Herman Melville and the Anatomies of Empire.” The objective of the course was to discuss Melville’s major work, especially his novel *Moby-Dick*, in the context of mid-nineteenth-century US discourses of territorial expansion and internal colonization. Students read the novels *Typee*, *Moby-Dick*, the novella *Billy Budd*, poetry, and excerpts from *Clarel, A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land*. We also traced the influence of Melville’s fiction on N. Scott Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn* (1968) and Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian* (1985). The group consisted of sixteen students, majors of English and creative writing as well as education, two Honors students among them. My teaching experience was a rich and rewarding one and, according to feedbacks, it was also enjoyable and eye-opening for the students as well. Apart from doing individual presentations and taking part in classroom discussions, students completed two written assignments for the course, a short essay or a piece of creative writing connected to the texts we examined in class as well as a research essay. Our collaboration has been going on since I returned in Hungary, as a selection of their shorter pieces and research essays were selected for the special Melville issue (Fall 2010) of *The Quadrant, A Journal of Student Research* published biannually by the Department of English Literatures and Cultures at the University of Pécs.

My research project investigated how the Frontier provided a complex imaginative framework for American fiction in the period between the 1820s and 1850s. It examined major novels by James Fenimore Cooper, Edgar Allan Poe, and Herman Melville and Harriet Beecher Stowe. I studied these works within the broader historical context of US westward expansion and empire building, in their relation to the political and social discourses of the time: the ideology of Manifest Destiny, as well as attitudes regarding race and gender relations in a period when the United States acquired its continental territory. As I had exhausted

the resources available in Hungary, the books and journals available at the Penfield Library at SUNY Oswego or obtained by interlibrary loan were essential for my progress. Professor David Hill provided solid professional guidance concerning the scope and structure of my project as well as with practical advice about library resources. During my grant period I completed about a third of the book I am working on as well as three related research articles. Two of them were already published in Hungary, and a third one in a journal in Slovenia.

My method of approach integrated both the literary and the cultural focus for a discussion of the broader cultural implications of nineteenth-century American fiction. The primary texts that constituted the objects of analysis (*The Leatherstocking Tales*, *Arthur Gordon Pym*, *Moby-Dick*) were examined together with the works of authors less studied in Hungary (frontier romances by Lydia Maria Child, Catherine Sedgwick, Robert Montgomery Bird and William Gilmore Simms) and narratives (travel narratives by Richard Henry Dana Jr. and Francis Parkman Jr.) published in the same period. During the antebellum period the cultural impact of these writers was even more relevant than those of canonical authors. Such a contextualization is also helpful in drawing attention, on the one hand, to the generic roots of American fiction that reach back to the captivity and travel narratives. On the other hand, it offers an opportunity to discuss the political and ideological embeddedness of outstanding literary works in the cultural discourses of their time that were shaped by, among other factors, popular literature.

As the primary focus of the research was US empire building, it was necessary to link phases of the westward expansion to key political figures who were Frontier policy-makers, Presidents Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, and James Polk. Jefferson’s figure, both as political thinker and inspired visionary of an “empire for liberty,” must be a point of departure for the study of the cultural construction of racial otherness and of the early- and mid- nineteenth-century American vision of a white Republic. The ambivalences of his Indian policy, as well as the centrality of geographical space in envisaging the historical process of nation building mark Jefferson’s long-term impact in American culture. The consequences of early republican land policies and those of the Louisiana Purchase (1803) are explored in Cooper’s *Leatherstocking Tales*, especially in *The Pioneers* (1823) and *The Prairie* (1827); residues of the myth of the Noble Savage and the elimination of Native American presence are surfacing in *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) as well as in Catherine Sedgwick’s *Hobomok* (1824), and Lydia Maria Child’s *Hope Leslie* (1827).

Political and economic issues of Jacksonian America are reflected in the literature of the 1830s. Fictional accounts of experiences in contact zones are at the same time narratives of racial anxiety. The problem of settling and ownership of land, as well as the ruling out of peaceful coexistence between Native Americans and Anglo-Americans provides the

theme of Simms's *The Yemassee* (1835). Hostility towards the racial other and scripts for Indian elimination emerge in the subgenre of frontier fiction, the "Indian hater" novel such as Bird's *Nick of the Woods* (1837). Anxieties about racial contact in the South and dread of a race rebellion are reflected in Poe's *Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838). Finally, the settlement of Americans in Texas and California during the 1830s initiated social and political processes that led to the wide acceptance in American society of the ideology of Manifest Destiny. James Polk's presidency brought about the annexation of Texas (1845), the Oregon Treaty (1846) and the Mexican War (1846-48). The prospect and, by 1849, accomplishment of a continental empire inspired travel narratives that became both influential and popular in their time, such as Richard Henry Dana Jr.'s *Two Years before the Mast* (1840) and Francis Parkman's *The Oregon Trail* (1849). Expansion and empire-building becomes one of the major concerns of Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851).

The majority of the literary works published during the antebellum period not only reflected on the westward movement by settlement and conquest, but also contributed to the shaping of cultural discourses related to empire. Authors set their plots in the frontier and staged among their characters racial encounters that raised, and imaginatively solved, problems of racial coexistence. My study of representative works of the period, both fictional and non-fictional, sets out to pinpoint the latent complicity of Anglo-American authors with the colonialist discourses of their time even when their rhetoric seems to run counter to culturally established notions of the racial other. Such internalization of contemporary discourses are discernible in such authorial strategies as imaginatively eliminating, "writing out" Native Americans from the territories open for white settlement (Cooper, Child, Sedgwick), stereotyping Indians, Africans and Mexicans to emphasize physical and mental characteristics that ultimately contribute to envisioning their presence as a threat (Simms, Poe, Bird, Dana), as well as reifying Indians and Polynesians as noble savages or aesthetic objects (Dana, Parkman, Melville in *Typee*). Thus, the majority of works by Anglo-American authors, while in their surface rhetoric celebrate or tolerate racial encounter, set limits and boundaries by reinforcing latent fear of otherness as well as notions of difference subliminally present in the mind-sets of their readers.

The anxieties manifested in these works concern the colonizer's own self and identity endangered by the quick incorporation of territories and the relatively slow process of cultural integration of otherness into the economy and culture, the "body" and "mind" of the empire. Such anxieties are most often triggered by envisaged threats to racial purity and to the social status of the Anglo-American male individual. In the literature of the period the expression of these two interests often coincides. In the essentially male-dominated, patriarchal society of nineteenth-century US, the Frontier appeared in the popular imagination as a place for men, and a scene of manly activities like hunting and

fighting Indians. Male couples engaging in Frontier adventures are pervasive in popular culture, but also in literature. Such pairs, like Natty Bumppo and Chingachgook in *The Leatherstocking Tales* or Ishmael and Queequeg in *Moby-Dick*, are often interracial, the white male representing the Self (in literature, the central consciousness, or the narrator) and his companion representing the Other (the friend, the helper). Such representations generally reflect the homosocial structure of society, and simultaneously constitute the imaginative exploitation and appropriation of the racial other. They often have undertones, innuendoes of homosexual relationship. This second aspect has a subversive function, and undermines the binary oppositions at the core of colonialist discourse: white, superior, powerful, dominant (male) vs. non-white, inferior, powerless, submissive (female). The bond between the narrator Ishmael and his cannibal friend Queequeg in *Moby-Dick* is a case in point, and, to a lesser extent, Pym and his helper Peters in *Arthur Gordon Pym*. Racial symbiosis of a similar quality appears between the autobiographical gentlemen-narrators and their male companions in *Two Years before the Mast* and *The Oregon Trail*, represented by Dana and his Kanaka "friend," and Parkman and his guide Henri Chatillon. In all these cases the Self (Pym, Parkman, Ishmael) surrenders initiative and power (attributes of male identity) to the Other. Also, the Frontier appears as a place of liminality where the rules of "civilized" society do not apply. For the white hero this is a place where his body, status and masculinity are in danger. He will choose either to surrender his status and admit it, like Pym and Ishmael, or will try to preserve it discursively, like Dana and Parkman's autobiographical narrators.

Among the authors and works mentioned above, Melville and his seminal novel *Moby-Dick* deserve special attention. With *Typee*, Melville contributed massively to the contemporary cultural discourse regarding exploration and offered up fantasies of exotic primitivism. In *Moby-Dick*, however, he offers a more complex approach regarding US empire building as well as the implications and consequences of Manifest Destiny. He also examines the racial and gender matrix of mid-nineteenth-century America. The name of the ship, the *Pequod*, establishes from the outset the novel's multiple connections with Anglo-American genocidal exploits in the New World. On the one hand, the hunters and the hunted whales are alternately related to American Indians and white colonizers. On the other, the massive quest for the control of the Pacific, dramatized by the whaling expedition, points to a US economic, political, colonial, enterprise during the first decades of the century. An important concern of the novel is with the racial body and the cultural construction of racial otherness. The cutting up of the whale and the violent penetration into its body dramatizes the plight of the racial body in nineteenth-century American culture. During the 1830s and 1840s the emerging science of "ethnology" located racial difference in the body, classified racial characteristics in anatomical

descriptions, and established a hierarchy between the races. Ishmael's categorization of whales according to a system applied to books and printing reflects Melville's dissident opinion, and suggests the cultural roots of anthropological differentiations. Also, Melville boldly explored the gendered body and its sexual and reproductive functions. Scenes from the whales' family life reveal the domestic, reproductive, female aspect of life, and condemn the disdain and destruction of reproductive activity and maternal care by the violent masculine penetration of the harpoon and cutting-spade into the whale's body.

A study of the literature produced by Anglo-American authors must offer an opportunity to examine the cultural discourse of the period produced by representatives of a socially and ethnically dominant group. Research with such a scope also means an immersion into discourses produced in a position of power, and allows a more thorough understanding of the social and cultural construction of whiteness and masculinity in literary works. Applying the categories and terminology of cultural and gender studies for an approach of a body of texts responding to a specific historical enterprise, US empire building, contributes to a deeper understanding of an important segment of the literary canon.

## 2. Community

Due to the assistance of the International Student and Scholar Services and of my colleagues at SUNY Oswego, I became involved in international events on and outside campus. I met fellow visiting scholars, attended theater performances and concerts as well as ice hockey games. I had the opportunity to hear poetry readings and visit exhibitions organized on campus. Also, I was able to observe classes taught by my colleague Robert Moore at the Department of English and Creative Writing. The journalist Jeff Rae published an interview with me in the Oswego Campus News, so a larger number of students became aware of my presence apart from those who attended my course, or whose readings and project presentations I had attended.

As a visiting scholar from Hungary, I made myself available for giving lectures about issues concerning Central and Eastern European societies. The historian Professor Geraldine Forbes kindly invited me to give a presentation in her European history lecture course about the situation of women in Hungary after the Second World War and after the downfall of the Communist régime in 1989. Students were interested in the topic, so the presentation was followed by tentative questions and a lively discussion. Earlier, on 16 March, the ZONTA International Women's Club in Oswego had requested that I take part in their monthly reunion and give a lecture on women's lives in Hungary after Communism. This presentation focused less on the historical context and more on issues of family, career, social roles, and media images of women in present-day Hungary. Taking part in a regular, scheduled meeting of a women's

organization was an entirely new experience that convinced me about the importance of women's social networks in a community.

There were further professional presentations I was involved in throughout my Fulbright period. Nazareth College in Rochester, NY, also a partner university of the University of Pécs, invited me for a visit and a public lecture. At Nazareth College I attended several classes, visited the library and on April 13 I gave a public lecture entitled "Anglomania in Hungary from the Eighteenth to the Mid-Twentieth Century." The lecture had a cultural and literary focus and introduced trends in taste, public behavior, political as well as the importance of Great Britain's influence in Hungary in regarding social, economic and technological development.

Also in April, having applied and acquired the support of the Fulbright Occasional Lecturer Program, I visited the Departments of History at San Francisco State University and Mills College (also SFSU). On April 29 and 30 I gave a public lecture and three classroom presentations on two topics, "The Situation of Women in Hungary after 1945" and "Coming of Age in Communist Central Europe." My visit and presentations were organized by my friend and colleague, a member of the Fulbright family, Professor William H. Issel, Professor Emeritus at San Francisco State University, Mills College. The presentations were well attended by students and faculty, and the feedback was very favorable. The second, "Coming of Age" talk was especially well received as it concentrated on cultural and youth policies in Communist Romania and Hungary. As an ethnic Hungarian, a native of Romania, and at present a Hungarian citizen, I was able to offer a comparative view on two entirely different strategies of indoctrination and containment of young people in these two countries during the Communist régimes. Although the intention of my presentations was to disseminate information regarding Hungarian history and society, I applied my professional skills in American Studies in order to give an outline of and to interpret the issues covered by the lectures in the academic contexts US students would be familiar with: the three waves of feminism, the development of the discipline of Women's Studies, as well as the history of the Cold War, and the inner contradictions of totalitarian régimes that finally led to the fall of the Iron Curtain.

While in Berkeley and San Francisco, I had the opportunity to visit Stanford University. This one-day trip bore special importance for me because of a long overdue professional encounter. I had been corresponding with Professor Hilton Obenzinger for about ten years, as we share an interest in Herman Melville's 1856-57 journey to the Holy Land and his major long poem *Clarel* (1876). I wrote my Ph.D. dissertation on Melville's poetry and this work in particular, and Professor Obenzinger published a book on Melville and Mark Twain's Holy Land experience. As the book came out after I had submitted my dissertation so I could not use it as a resource, but during the years that followed we frequently

exchanged ideas and information about the topic. For me it was of special importance to meet Professor Obenzinger in person, discuss further ideas applicable to my research and also to reinforce our friendship.

### 3. Travel

Apart from traveling with professional purpose, my son and I had the time and opportunity to travel in the US during the spring break. We visited New York and spent eight lovely days touring historical sites and museums. We share an interest in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American culture history, so we preferred areas like Downtown Manhattan, Ellis Island and Harlem. However, I also tried to satisfy a teenager's special interests by visiting the Museum of Natural History, included some vigorous exercise in our program by taking a bicycle tour of Central Park, and added entertainment by attending a play on Broadway. Right after leaving New York we visited Washington D.C., combining extensive sightseeing with intensive explorations of the Smithsonian museums and several other art museums. One of the highlights of our visit in Virginia was Mount Vernon where we updated our knowledge about George and Martha Washington. With hindsight we discovered that our visits in each of the metropolises we traveled to, New York, Washington D.C., and San Francisco we encountered, by chance or by careful planning, recurring themes. One of them was natural history and evolution, especially the work of Charles Darwin. On the other hand, we had the opportunity to attend not only museums but several temporary exhibits related to the Holocaust. Both were powerful experiences for both for myself and my teenage son who has become, I may say, a better person and, what is also important, a seasoned cultural tourist.

Throughout my Fulbright grant period I had the honor and pleasure to be in the company of members of the Fulbright family. They gave me professional and personal assistance, and they were good friends. I frequently met Professors Geraldine Forbes (Fulbright visiting scholar in India) and Don Masterson (Fulbright visiting scholar in Ireland) in Oswego, NY, and visited William H. Issel (Fulbright scholar and Országh Chair in American Studies in Hungary) in Berkeley and San Francisco. In Washington D.C. I enjoyed the hospitality of Professor Frank N. Schubert, former Fulbright scholar in Romania. Their dedication to the Fulbright principles of professional cooperation and international friendship were exemplary. Our collaboration still continues in both areas.

While in the US, I was writing a blog in Hungarian about my Fulbright experience for my father, husband and elder son, other family members, friends and colleagues, entitled "Cornu Kópia." The blog had about 60 readers for, as a shy person, I only authorized its access by invitation. My son had his own similar blog, his readers were his father, brother, grandparents and classmates.

I would like to end my report with a personal note, evoking the lakes that made a lasting impression on the minds of both my son and myself. The campus of SUNY Oswego and our accommodation were situated near Lake Ontario where we could enjoy the grand scenery, observe wildlife and the change of seasons. Right before leaving the US, Professor Robert Moore drove us to Cooperstown, situated near Lake Otsego. The town, founded by William Cooper in 1786, is the birthplace of James Fenimore Cooper, the setting of *The Pioneers* (1823) and *The Deerslayer* (1841). As *The Leatherstocking Tales* is a major focus of my research this short visit to the site was a remarkable farewell and an enriching experience.