

Radicalism and the Quest for Identity in American Literature

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Abstract

The present research paper is principally intended to shed light on the role played by the American radical spirit as was expressed in American literature in shaping not only reality in the newly settled land but in building the identity of the American people as well. The article is meant to demonstrate how the American men of letters sought to revolt against all what was traditional in order to participate in having a typically American literature, culture and identity.

Keywords: radicalism, literature, identity, innovation

Introduction

It is no secret that the United States of America is a new nation. That is the reason why the Americans have often felt the necessity of having their own identity that should be distinct and entirely independent from the European identity. Since one of the recent connotation associated with radicalism is innovation" (McLaughlin, 2012, 22), one can say that the first settlers of the New World sought to be radical in order to be different and therefore, have the opportunity to enjoy a new identity. It is evident that literature was one of the most effective ways for achieving this goal. The present article is an attempt to examine the contribution of both the radical thought and literature to the building of the American identity. Consequently, the question that forces itself in this paper is the following: to what extent has radical literature in the United States contributed to the building of a

distinct American identity ?To start with, one need to clarify what is exactly meant by the three terms :*radicalism*, *literature* and *identity* ,and then one needs to treat them in an American context .

1-Defining Radicalism

Etymologically speaking, the term *radicalism* can be understood as “relating to or affecting the fundamental nature of something”; and “advocating a thorough or a complete political or social reform.” (*The Concise Oxford English Dictionary,2012*) But , the relevant and more appropriate noun definition is “an advocate of radical political or social reform”¹. Accordingly, one can therefore, confirm that the radical person is “anyone who supports and exercises an extreme or fundamental change in existing institutions or in political, social, or economic conditions”.(Ibid)

One should further note that if The COED adjectival definitions of radical thus stress the characteristics of completeness and extremity² (Ibid.), (but also the fundamental nature of the thing in question), another reading of the meaning of the term *radical* in the second edition of *the Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), tells us however, that if the notions of *extremity* and *completeness* associated with the term are more recent connotations, “the notion of fundamentals, or going to the root nature of a thing, go back to the earliest usages of the term”. (Ibid.) Recently one can notice that radicalism started to be defined as a spirit of reform and change for the better.

As it has been pointed out earlier , radicalism is sometimes linked to innovation and rebellion or even a revolution against traditional beliefs. In American history, radicalism was one of the characteristic features of the American life .From a historical point of view ,there is a need to draw attention to the important fact that the first settlers of the American land were puritans who were religious radicals who wanted a different way of life in a different community .Those groups of radicals brought to the New World the radical spirit that still characterises the American character and life.

¹ namely, definition 3.

2-Defining Literature

First of all, one needs to draw attention to the fact that the majority of people do not feel the necessity of defining literature, for everybody believes that he knows what is meant by literature. Generally speaking, the term *literature* often refers to prose (novels, and short stories), poetry, and drama. It is certain that nobody mistakes them for something else. But men of letters and critics believe that defining literature is not just defining it in terms of its main genres. For this reason, various attempts have been made to define literature by critics, thinkers, and men of letters themselves.

Interestingly, *The Online Etymology Dictionary* states that "the origin of the term literature goes back to late 14c., from Latin *literatura/litteratura* "learning, a writing, grammar," originally "writing formed with letters," from *littera/littera* "letter". Originally "book learning" (it replaced Old English *boccræft*"³. (*The Online Etymology Dictionary*) While *The Macmillan Dictionary* defines literature as "any writings in which expression and form, in connection with ideas of permanent and universal interest, are characteristic or essential features, as poetry, novels, history, biography, and essays". (*The Macmillan Dictionary*) Literature is then "the entire body of writings of a specific language, period, people "Literature then is the art of composition either in a written or oral form and this composition often takes the form of either prose or poetry. (*Chambers Dictionary*) .

In this regard, it needs to be stressed that literature is often considered as the mirror of society but in most of cases literature goes beyond the mere reflection of what happens in society to shaping reality. Of course, this is due to the impact that literature might exercise on the readers who are part of the community. In an American context, the American men of letters tended to express their radical ideas in their writings since the puritan period and one of the most radical ideas was to establish a unique American society that would be different from the one left behind, here it is meant the British one. That is why the relation between literature and identity is so strong and therefore can never be underestimated.

3-Defining Identity

It is noticeable that the issue of identity is often a highly complex issue because it is tightly linked to the individual and society's life and existence since it has to do with who the

individual is ? and who the people inside society are ? Many scholars interested in all that is related to identity gave many definitions to the concept .Some argued that "identities are “relatively stable, role-specific understandings and expectations about self” (Wendt 1992, 397),while others defended the idea that “identity is ... the way individuals and groups define themselves and are defined by others on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, language, and culture” (Deng 1995, 1).

It is important to understand that the simplest explanation of identity is the saying that it is a term that is used to summarize “people’s concepts of who they are, of what sort of people they are, and how they relate to others” (Hogg and Abrams 1988, 2)But among the most relevant definitions is the one that stipulates that " identity “refers to the ways in which individuals and collectivities are distinguished in their social relations with other individuals and collectivities” (Jenkins 1996, 4).If one considers the social nature of identity , one might accept that “National identity describes that condition in which a mass of people have made the same identification with national symbols – have internalised the symbols of the nation ...” (Bloom 1990, 52).

Concerning the issue of identity in the American society ,one can say that since America is a new nation, the Americans had to spare no effort to build a national identity . At first, the lack of an independent national identity created in the Americans not a only a feeling of being lost but a complex of inferiority that sprung basically from the belief that they were without an original identity and culture that would be typically American .Properly understood ,they considered their cultural and intellectual depending on Britain as a defect that should be reformed and this made them haunted by the desire to detach themselves from their mother country .In other words ,after having their political independence , they started to perceive the idea that a cultural independence was also needed ,and it also deserves struggle .In line with this Philip Freneau , the famously known as the poet of the American Revolution notes :

Ah! traitors, lost to every sense of shame,
Unjust supporters of a tyrant’s claim;
Foes to the rights of freedom and of men,
Flush’d with the blood of thousands you have slain,
To the just doom the righteous heavens decree
We leave you toiling still in cruelty,
Or on dark plans in future herds to meet,
Plans form’d in hell, and projects half complete:
The years approach that shall to ruin bring

Your lords, your chiefs, your desolating king,
 Whose murderous acts shall stamp his name accurs'd,
 And his last efforts more than damn the first. (Freneau, 1786,
 206)

It is obvious that these verses from Freneau 's masterpiece *British Prison Ship* implies a direct renunciation of any kind of link between the thirteen colonies and Britain . Simply put, Freneau wanted his poem to be an American cry for independence from the mother country .One can easily observe that the poem gives a very negative image of the British whom the poet considers as the enemies of rights of freedom and of men.

4- Radical Literature and American Identity

At the very outset ,it would be useful to clarify that in this article ,radical literature is every kind of writing that brings innovation and marks a departure from the traditional literary norms .It should be further noted that the Americans and since the colonial period tried to construct an American identity .As puritans who immigrated to the newly settled land ,they always believed that they were the chosen people who had left Britain in order to settle in the promised land; the latter that was the appropriate place for establishing a godly and a utopian society. This belief was deeply rooted in the minds of the puritan settlers and was, in fact ,a solid background for the American project of having a completely independent identity from any other part of the world .Winthrop the governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony has always insisted on the belief that America was the promised and the Americans were the chosen people so they their nation should be a city on the hill all people should look upon them .This extremely positive ,optimistic and ambitious belief has always been behind the American feeling of national pride and became one of the fundamental causes of the American endless search for international leadership .

Concerning literature ,there is a need to clarify that literary calls for intellectual and cultural detachment from the mother country had been heard far long before the calls of political independence were heard .Perhaps, one of those who first discussed and wrote about the uniqueness of the American way of life and personality was Michel Crevecoeur. This French man who immigrated to the newly settled land .Having suffered from the confining feudal system and the monopoly of land by the landed gentry in the old world, it was easy for

him to notice the difference between the agrarian life in the old world and the one in the new world .In his *Letters from an American Farmer*, Crèvecoeur insisted that land possession in America is possible for all Americans who work it .This agrarian theory marked a real departure from the Old World's agrarian system as it put the basis for the belief that the newly settled land is a garden .In this line, Crèvecoeur affirms :

It [America] is not composed, as in Europe, of great lords who possess everything and of a herd of people who have nothing. Here are no aristocratic families, no courts, no kings, no bishops, no ecclesiastic dominion, no invisible power giving to very visible one; no great manufacturers employing thousands, no great refinements of luxury. The rich and poor are not as far removed from each other as in Europe. (Crèvecoeur,2008 ,431)

Interesting , however is the idea that Crèvecoeur was among the first writers to criticise the Old World and to sow contempt to life in Europe .Moreover ,he went beyond that to describe the upper class there as manipulating and ruling over the poor, while he considered America as a new society with a vacuum that will be filled with equality, tolerance, and freedom. One can understand from the passage above that, according to him, the poor in Europe had no freedom because they had to farm the lands of their feudal overlords, without being able to keep anything for themselves.

As regards the uniqueness of the American personality, Crèvecoeur insisted that the American character was far from being British or European, but rather it is the result of a mixture of blood that gave a completely new race .The American for Crèvecoeur is of a new origin; it is a hybrid race .This hybridity that gave uniqueness to the American man is the result of America being a melting pot. In line with this he explicates :

What then is the American, this new man? He is an American, who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds. He has become an American by being received in the broad lap of our great Alma Mater. Here individuals of all

racés are melted into a new race of man, whose labors and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world. Americans are the western pilgrims . (Ibid., 123)

From the foregoing analysis, it seems obvious that Crèvecoeur had a firm belief that in America, however, immigrants could use the cultural and intellectual tools they brought from Europe while serving their masters to create their own freedom. This new American principle is based on the individual's self-interested ownership of land and its resources. He puts the idea as follows :

The American is a new man, who acts upon new principles; he must therefore entertain new ideas, and form new opinions. . . . Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labours and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world. . . . An immigrant when he first arrives . . . no sooner breathes our air than he forms new schemes, and embarks in designs he never would have thought of in his own country. . . . He begins to feel the effects of a sort of resurrection; hitherto he had not lived, but simply vegetated; he now feels himself a man . . . Judge what an alteration there must arise in the mind and thoughts of this man; . . . his heart involuntarily swells and glows; this first swell inspires him with those new thoughts which constitute an American. (Ibid.)

For his part ,Washington Irving thoroughly felt the necessity of getting the American literary and cultural independence. In his attempt to contribute to this national mission he tended in his literary productions to depend on purely American ideas and myths that are directly linked to the American setting and environment .In addition to that ,he deliberately used some German folklore and cultural ideas in an attempt to strengthen Crèvecoeur's theory of America being a melting pot .The reader of *Rip Van Winkle* ,for instance ; the short story written by Irving , can easily feel the variety of the American culture; as he can perceive the versatile nature of the American people . He writes :

His historical researches, however, did not lie so much among books as among men; for the former are lamentably scanty on his favorite topics; whereas he found the old burghers, and still more their wives, rich in that legendary lore, so invaluable to true history. Whenever, therefore, he happened upon a genuine

Dutch family, snugly shut up in its low-roofed farmhouse, under a spreading sycamore, he looked upon it as a little clasped volume of black-letter,' and studied it with the zeal of a book-worm. (Irving , 1994, 1-2)

There is no denying that the reader of the story often finds himself far from the traditional British context and cultural scene ;he rather finds himself in totally different culture in an American setting :

His mind now misgave him; he began to doubt whether both he and the world around him were not bewitched. Surely this was his native village which he had left but the day before. There stood the Kaatskill mountains--there ran the silver Hudson at a distance--there was every hill and dale precisely as it had always been--Rip was sorely perplexed—‘That flagon last night,’ thought he, ‘has addled my poor head sadly! ("Ibid.)

For his part, James Fennimore Cooper went in his search for the uniqueness of the American identity to insisting on the Indian culture in the American life. In unprecedented attempt to draw the reader's attention to the cultural differences that could intermingle in the American society ,Cooper saw that the quest for an American unique and independent identity would not be successful without introducing the Indian culture and people in his literary works as an integral part of the American life and as one of the important American cultural elements that might strengthen the difference between the American society and the British one . “The pale-faces are masters of the earth, and the time of the red-men has not yet come again.”Tamenund, the Delaware patriarch, speaking at the end of the novel (Cooper, Chapter XXXIII).

In addition to this ,one cannot fail to notice that in his masterpiece *The Last of the Mohicans*, Cooper emphasises the hybrid nature of the American society through referring to the possible mixture between the Indian blood and the American one. This appears in his using of a hybrid character " Cooper also renounced racism against the Indians ."and throughout the novel, he tended to use statements that serve this goal . For instance , one can read : "There is reason in an Indian, though nature has made him with a red-skin!"Hawkeye speaking to Chingachgook (Ibid.,Chapter III).

Interesting is the idea that Cooper's work was the first work that draw attention to the Indian presence in the American cultural scene .This legacy was for Cooper one of the most important arguments of the uniqueness of the American identity.It is worth noting that Cooper was the first American man of letters to attack racism and to call for the fair treatment of the natives in America . This radical attitude is quite obvious in his *The Last of the Mohicans* : “Should we distrust the man because his manners are not our manners, and that his skin is dark?”Cora speaking of Magua. (Ibid.,Chapter I).

Despite all the previously discussed literary achievements in the American literary life ,Sidney Smith, a British critic once wrote “the Americans literature have none” those words by Smith was so humiliating and insulting not only to the American men of letters but to all the American people .Literature is part of culture and the culture is a direct reflection of the nation's identity to deny the existence of an American literature was to deny the existence of an American identity .This was the reason why the Americans had to respond to Smith. Literary speaking ,they had to stop imitating the British way o f writings and to adopt a completely new ideas ,styles ,and even themes.

Fortunately, the era saw the emergence of a religious philosophical and literary movement called Transcendentalism .This movement offered a golden opportunity for the Americans to prove not only their literary independence but ideological independence as well .Many of the American radical ideas like self reliance and decentralised religion were well expressed by writers like Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson who both were transcendentalists and who tended to export the American philosophy of life to Europe . Perhaps , the famous literary work that can be considered as a transcendentalist *par excellence* is Thoreau 's *Walden* or *Life in the Woods* ; the latter that was a sort of an autobiographical account of Thoreau's life in Walden Pond .In describing his life in the woods, Thoreau notes :

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practise resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close,

to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms.
(Thoreau, 2009,145)

Despite all the previously discussed American attempts to literary defend the independent American identity ,no literary work was so praised in this regard as Twain's literary work *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. It should be stressed that the great bulk of critics agree that a close reading to Mark Twain 's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* might demonstrate that this great novelist in the American literary history preferred to follow in the footsteps of Irving and Cooper. The great bulk of critics affirm that he tended to portray the true American character as entirely different from the ones used to be depicted in the so called genteel novel.

More than that, Twain in his masterpiece went beyond that to even mock at all what was part of the British legacy. The protagonist of Twain's novel is unique in his way of life and in dealing with society .Twain wanted his major character to be the representative of the American personality .Huck is a spontaneous boy who used to lie and steal that is why he finds it difficult to bear the confining conditions and the restricting social rituals in Miss Watson's house .Freedom for Huck is life ;the latter that is directly linked to nature .This the reason why he escaped to the Mississippi River :

Mornings, before daylight, I slipped into corn fields and borrowed a watermelon, or a mushmelon, or a punkin, or some new corn, or things of that kind. Pap always said it warn't no harm to borrow things, if you was meaning to pay them back, sometime; but the widow said it warn't anything but a soft name for stealing, and no decent body would do it. (Twain, 1996, Chapter 12,. 72)

Still there is another important point to be made about Twain's novel . In fact, what is worth noting is that the reader of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* often feels the American sense of freedom. This freedom is one of the fundamental principles of the American government. Huck is portrayed by Twain as a little radical who wants to change his way of life in accordance to libertarian ethics and principles .He seems to be the kind of persons who believes in the necessity of innovation and rebellion through escapism .He refuses to conform to the social norms that Miss Watson tries to impose on him like going to

school, reading the Bible and many other genteel rituals. Mocking at the genteel way of life ,Huck describes life inside Miss Watson's house in the following lines:

The widow rang a bell for supper, and you had to come to time. When you got to the table you couldn't go right to eating, but you had to wait for the widow to tuck down her head and grumble a little over the victuals, though there warn't really anything the matter with them (Ibid., 1.3)

No wonder to say that language is part of identity .Twain might be a strong believer in this idea . In reading *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, one might easily observe that Twain deliberately wrote his text in an American vernacular which is different from all the British vernaculars .It is worth noting that this is part of Twain’s major contribution to the American national project of establishing an American identity with different language as a means of communication .In his deliberate use of the American vernacular, Twain added to the American cultural scene a linguistic dimension . Consequently , it should be readily apparent that if Cooper used the Indian legacy as an element of uniqueness, Twain seems to suggest that the Americans ,being now settlers of a new land, could develop their own new dialect and this linguistic change can be taken for a primary step towards a more general cultural and intellectual independence.

To understand the importance of identity as a literary topic , it is important to recognize that, it is this emphasis on the American unique identity that made the great bulk of the American men of letters consider Twain’s masterpiece as one of the most important American literary achievements .It is the national pride stressed in the novel that appealed to T S Eliot and made him describe the novel as the masterpiece of all American literature .And it was the same reason that made Ernest Hemingway declare that "All modern American literature comes from one book by Twain ,*The Adventures of Huckle Berry Finn* ". For his part ,William Faulkner called Twain “the first truly American writer”; while Eugene O’Neill considered him “the true father of American literature.” It is certain that these important statements and critical judgements by those outstanding figures in American literature came to strengthen the belief that the real American literature is all that stresses the uniqueness and the cultural independence of the American identity.

Conclusion

The conclusions that can be drawn from the foregoing analysis of the American men of letters' radical struggle to establish their own identity are the following : first the American writers, being aware of the role that can be played by literature, had to depend on myths ,some were of their own inventions like the one that was first launched by John Winthrop who declared that the newly settled land was the promised land or New Jerusalem and the Americans were therefore ,the chosen people on Earth while other myths were borrowed from the European folklore, as it was the case with Washington Irving. One may also observe that the majority of the American authors felt the necessity of using an American setting and characters .Some novelists went beyond that to use Indian characters James Fennimore Cooper was one of those writers .Secondly and more importantly one can establish the fact that the American men of letters have really played an important role in helping the Americans build their identity through being successful in consolidating those myths in the American culture . Simply put ,when one thoroughly examines the effort made by the American men of letters in defining America and the Americans , it becomes clear the American quest for identity made them focus on all that makes them different and exceptional that is the reason why this desire to be different turned to be a desire to be exceptional and why not superior .

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