

# **American Literature and the Consolidation of the American Exceptional Culture**

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## **Abstract**

The present paper treats comprehensively the contribution of literature in general and American literature in particular to the consolidation of the social myths that help society adopt changes especially the ones brought by the industrial boom to finally build an independent and even an exceptional culture . The research paper focuses on two short stories: the first is Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Rappacini's Daughter" while the second is Melville's "The Tartarus of Maids". In both literary works the writers through the portrayal of America as a garden and their acceptance of industry in it tended to consolidate the famous old American myth which presents the United States as a city (industry) upon a hill (pastoral).

## **Introduction**

It is no secret that the role of literature in shaping reality constitutes a wide space of debate in recent years .Critics all around the world have shown a special

interest to this important topic . The present paper is an attempt to trace the contribution of American literature to the consolidation of some myths that later became a fundamental part in the American culture . In this regard ,it is important to emphasize that the half century of American history from the close of the Civil War to the outbreak of the Industrial Revolution was a period during which industry ,which had already flourished in Britain and other parts of the world , began to alter the American social and economic climate .At first ,the implications of the changes brought about by industrialization were not fully realized by the young American generation which came of age about 1870 .However; a handful of thoughtful writers started to write their interpretation of the era.

Interesting is the idea that literature, as the literary critic Raymond Williams affirms , is part of the general process which creates institutions in which the meanings that are valued by the community are shared and made active. It is not surprising that this fundamental role of literature made of it a basic cultural path for the acceptance of new philosophies and ways of life. So literature does not only reflect the reality of society, but it contributes to the shaping of this reality. (Hart 123)

In this article, it will be shown how American literature responded to industrialization .This will be of course with reference to two literary works. The

first is a short story by the romantic writer Nathaniel Hawthorne while the second is another short story by Herman Melville.

### **-The British and the American Reactions to Industrialism**

Probably, it would be useful at the outset to point at the difference between the response of the Americans to industry and that of the British. The British, to whom industry had first made itself felt, rejected industrial life and considered it as a source of evil. This British attitude to industrialization manifests itself in the writing of Matthew Arnold who emphasized the demoralizing and devastating effects of industry on the British society.

In fact, the majority of critics observed that the desire to transcend the limitations of the modern world constitutes Arnold's most common theme. Throughout Arnold's writings, one can observe that he was clearly opposed to modern industrialization; moreover, he believed that it created a laborious work ethic, and that the individual in the modern world ended up wasting his life away on mundane tasks. He referred to such a life as a "jail." This is the reason why it is not surprising that many of his poems incorporate this viewpoint. For example, in "The Scholar-Gipsy," he shows and supports the way the scholar-gipsy seeks to break away from this unbearable modern type of lifestyle. Still one can note that in his "A Summer Night," he condemns how the modern industrialized world transforms the individuals into either enslaved laborers or those who are willing to be considered "madmen" by breaking away. No wonder then that Arnold poses nature as a contrast to this industrialized life..

In this regard ,one can equally add that some observers even consider that the writings of the British writer , Arnold made the industrial spirit decline in Britain .Indeed ,he advocated a return to the culture of the Middle Ages as a therapy to the industrial fever .In other words, Arnold managed to work out a purely new British ideology which was a replica of the aristocratic class of the time, an ideology that emphasized the agrarian aspect of the British society and totally rejected industrialization.

The same thing could not be said about the American men of letters who did not reject industrialization as a modern phenomenon in the American society. Surprisingly enough ,the American writers did not consider that their role was to express the American people's reaction to industrialization, but they were convinced that they should help the Americans adapt to the changes in their lives and to the adjustment caused by the industrial boom.

Significantly enough , what was striking about the American response to industrialization was that they accepted it because it would give them the opportunity to build a new culture far from the European influence and far from the Indian past as well. The American industrial culture is generally based on myths.

**-The Machine in the Garden: an American Myth**

There is a need to note here that the term *myth* from the New Latin *mthus*, from Late Latin *mthos*, from Greek *muthos* is often used to refer to a story often describing the adventures of superhuman beings that attempts to describe the origin of a people's customs or beliefs or to explain mysterious events (as the changing of the seasons) for example, a person or thing that exists only in the imagination: the dragon is a *myth*.( *Dictionary of the English Language*)

The myth is also defined as a popular belief that is false or unsupported. it is then A traditional, typically ancient story dealing with supernatural beings, ancestors, or heroes that serves as a fundamental type in the worldview of a people, as by explaining aspects of the natural world or delineating the psychology, customs, or ideals of society: *the myth of Eros and Psyche; a creation myth*(.ibid)

Still ,it is worth noting that the myth can also be a popular belief or story that has become associated with a person, institution, or occurrence, especially one considered to illustrate a cultural ideal: *a star whose fame turned her into a myth; the pioneer myth of suburbia*. (ibid)At this point ,it is important to draw attention to the fact that sometimes the term myth is used to refer to any fiction or half-truth, especially one that forms part of an ideology. It is often a fictitious story, person, or thing: "*German artillery superiority on the Western Front was a myth*" . (ibid)

In this regard, one needs equally to add that the newly settled land was a world that revealed new truths and was considered as a world of freedom and liberties even for those who wanted to invent new myths .In fact the settlers of the New World felt the need to invent new myths to be used as the cultural foundation for them as Americans .For this reason, American history was full of mythic interpretations of the American reality.

It is no secret that it was through the invention of cultural myths that the Americans could justify their acceptance of industry and it was, of course ,thanks to literature that new myths were invented and old ones were refurbished .So ,one characteristic feature of the American cultural response to industry was its mythic dimension .another characteristic feature of this response was its nonextremism because the Americans when they accepted industry they did not reject agriculture which is part of their traditional life and one of the features of New Jerusalem or the American Utopia as it was described in the Puritan literature .

As a matter of fact, the American adoption of industry did not mean that the pastoral view of America should get out of the scene. That is why in American films or pictures painted by Americans, one often finds the image of the industrial areas surrounded by trees. In fact this mixture of the industrial and

the agrarian aspects of America reached its height during the Cold War when the American writers did their best to portray America as a peaceful and unpolluted country by hiding the ugly industrial America behind the beautiful and smiling agrarian and pastoral America.

### **-Nathaniel Hawthorne's Attitude to Industrialization**

As one of the American major fiction writers who took upon themselves the project of defining American identity (John E. Alvis 1), Nathaniel Hawthorne's attitude to industrialization was a purely mythic because Hawthorne as a man of a system—he was a democrat—and the Democratic Party has always advocated agriculture and provincialism and he was a Yankee who was educated in the advanced industrial environment of Massachusetts and who could not have a hostile view about industry. So he had to accept industry without rejecting the pastoral view of America. This Hawthornian attitude to industry can be clearly realized through his short story "Rappaccini's Daughter" which was written as half of Hawthorne's tales in Concord and was published in *The Democratic Review*, a journal committed to women's issues (Millington 87)

There is a need here to emphasize the fact that the story of "Rappaccini's Daughter" occurs in Rappaccini's botanical garden. This beautiful and lush place can easily be compared to the Garden of Eden, whereby Beatrice plays Eve, and Giovanni is Adam who is introduced and subsequently induces the fall

from grace. Although Beatrice's life was lonely, she did not know the extent of her role in her father's experiment. Like the case in other very similar plots in the works of Hawthorne, when Giovanni decides to breach her space, he is infected as well; however, it is his heartlessness that causes Beatrice to take the supposed antidote that leads to her death.

It is remarkable that in "Rappacini's Daughter", Nathaniel Hawthorne clearly integrated industry into the pastoral. So he created a myth out of an old one. In this short story Hawthorne shows how good and evil can coexist and industry which is represented in the story by the industry of medicine by distilling poisonous shrubs cohabitates with nature; the latter which is represented by the garden. Dr Rappacini, the emblematic figure of the modern industrial era, is a doctor who is able to rescue people from death as well as he can kill them with the use of his scientific knowledge:

Nothing could exceed the intentness with which this scientific gardener examined every shrub which grew in his path; it seemed as if he was looking into their innermost nature, making observations in regard to their creative essence, and discovering why one leaf grew in this shape, and another in that, and wherefore such and such flowers differed among themselves in hue and perfume. (Hawthorne 649)

In this very quote, one can observe that Hawthorne probably wants to suggest that science is a double edged weapon; just as it can cause the happiness and cure to people, it can cause their wretchedness and even their death:



But now, unless Giovanni's draughts of wine had bewildered his senses, a singular incident occurred...a drop or two of moisture from the broken stem of the flower descended upon the lizard's head. For an instant, the reptile contorted itself violently, and then lay motionless in the sunshine. Beatrice observed this remarkable phenomenon, and crossed herself, sadly, but without surprise; nor did she therefore hesitate to arrange the fatal flower in her bosom. (653)

In reality, Rappacini is portrayed as a doctor who can cure the patients but in the meantime, he has a terrible power for destructing people as he did intentionally with his daughter Beatrice and her lover Giovanni.

There is no denying that the major theme of the story seems to be the reconciliation between industry and agriculture and the coexistence of innocence (Beatrice) and danger. So industry as it is described in Hawthorne's short story is not all that destructive; the botanic garden shows that it can coexist with nature and innocence. Another argument that defends industrialization is the fact that evil is not only found inside the garden which can be taken as a microcosm of the industrial era since it is the artifact or a manmade botanic garden. One can easily observe that evil in "Rappacini's Daughter" seems to exist everywhere inside the garden as well as outside it. Although the spiritual death of Beatrice is caused by her father, the industrialist, her physical death is caused by Giovanni who lives outside the garden and who opposes Rappacini's scientific experiments and achievements. (Millington 123)

## **-Herman Melville's Attitude to Industrialization**

The reader of Herman Melville's short story "The Tartarus of Maids", may find it seemingly different from that of Hawthorne in terms of the reaction to industrialization. Unlike Hawthorne, Melville seems to attack and severely criticize industrialization and by the standards of the time, the story seems to express an anticipated indictment of the industrial life in the United States. Moreover, in this brilliant story, Melville shows that one of the dangerous effects of the colossal industrial development of the time is the disruption of the family and the disappearance of the social ties inherited from the puritan tradition.

In this respect, it is important to draw attention to the important fact that throughout the story Melville's fundamental aim has been to provide a detailed description of the hellish atmosphere and the unhealthy conditions in which the girls work in the paper factory. The female workers are unmarried women, or to use Melville's words, "maids" who seem to be doomed to live individually without family because married women cannot be recruited. In this context, Melville writes:

"Then these are all maids," said I, while some pained homage to their pale virginity made me involuntarily bow.

"All maids." ( 23)  
"The girls," echoed I, glancing round at their silent forms. " Why is it, Sir, that in most factories, female operatives, of whatever age, are indiscriminately called girls, never women?"(ibid)

In addition to this , these girls are described as slaves who are obliged to feed the iron animal or the machine that provides paper:

..."This is the rag-room," coughed the boy.  
"You find it rather stifling here," coughed I, in answer; " but the girls don't cough."  
"Oh, they are used to it."( 24)

Little wonder then that, one can observe that the narrator of the story seems surprised by the bad working conditions in this factory. He seems also to cast a disapproving eye to the dangerous social changes brought by the industrial boom .However; for the surprise of the readers he did not provide a solution to the dilemma caused by the development of industrialization. He rather goes back to resume his business since he is a businessman. Surprisingly enough , he states:

"Ah, yes; the winter air in valleys, or gorges, or any sunken place, is far colder and more bitter than elsewhere. You would hardly believe it now, but it is colder here than at the top of Woe dolor Mountain." I dare say "it is, Sir. But time presses me; I must depart." With that, remuffling myself in dreadnaught and tippet, thrusting my hands into my huge sealskin mittens, I sallied out into the nipping air, and found poor Black, my horse, all cringing and doubled up with the cold. Soon, wrapped in furs and meditations, I ascended

from the Devil's Dungeon. At the Black Notch I paused, and once more bethought me of Temple-Bar. Then, shooting through the pass, all alone with inscrutable nature, I exclaimed—Oh! Paradise of Bachelors! and oh! Tartarus of Maids!(74)

At this point ,one must emphasize the important fact that the return of the narrator to his ordinary industrial society probably means his acceptance of industrialization as a lived reality though it is at least for him, is unpleasant .In other words ,Melville seems to suggest that industrialization is a necessary and needed evil for the American society and is part of the modern American life that no one can ignore or fight against. In fact, the reader of this story may feel that Melville had prophesied that America would be the most powerful industrial country in the world. In short, Melville and through this story seems to be working out an ideology that consider industrialization as part of the American identity.

### **Conclusion**

The conclusion that can be drawn from the study of the American literary reaction to industrialism is that ,indeed, American literature has played and is still playing an important role in helping the Americans adopt themselves

to the presence of industrialization in their daily life. In fact, the American writers contributed in a way or another to the invention and the refurbishing of cultural myths that justified the double nature of the American nation which is the possibility of the successful coexistence of agriculture and industry. It was thanks to this that the Americans could impose their cultural hegemony on the West simply because the Europeans were unable to invent myths the way the Americans did.

Undoubtedly ,the Americans with their acceptance of industrialization and their faithfulness to the pastoral managed to work out a totally new and original culture which is different from the European one and more original if compared to the puritan culture that had European roots .all the American writers have contributed to the working out of the myth once invented by John Winthrop who once stated: "...we shall consider that we are a city upon a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us". This myth came true in modern America which is really a city (industry) upon a hill (pastoral). (Marx 67) In the light of this, one can thus confirm the idea that American literature has not only played its role in expressing the American response to industrialization but more than that, it has contributed to a great extent to the consolidation of the industrial culture in the American way of life.

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