

Reading the Country of the Blue

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How do we perceive culture, especially one that is different from our own? According to anthropologist Clifford Geertz, such a process is conditioned by a series of signs signifying cultural practices that in themselves become invested with meaning. Acting as symbols, the signs derive their significance from their ability to be read from within and without the culture. As they filter through our consciousness, the symbols become subject to the influences of our own cultural conditioning, and their meanings develop in a complex system involving that which we know and that which is foreign, the "other" (89). It follows that our reading of other cultures, regardless of the form or medium it takes, is a "manufactured" process of pre-conceived notions, stereotypes, and the experiences we confront in our exposure to the similarities and differences existing between our own and other cultures.

Reading American literature as a means to understanding American culture poses a significant challenge because before the reading takes place, the individual perspective has already been contaminated, so to speak, by a pre-reading of cultural propaganda manifest in the marketing of America to the world. From Columbus's Edenic continent to conspicuous consumption to post-modern paranoia, America looms large in the global consciousness, a result of a new colonial imperialism brought about by the export of culture via new media: television, film, and the Internet. Subsequently, it becomes possible to "read" a culture through a variety of discourses without consulting and processing knowledge derived from actual literary texts. Yet the study of literature remains essential as much for what it contradicts as well as confirms about the United States and its cultural evolution.

Invariably, the subjective view of culture involves the affective response of the reader to any given text. Half a century ago, in the twilight of his years, my grandfather sought refuge in his garden where, amidst the scent of roses and tobacco, he indulged his favorite pastime - reading the American Western. Between the faded pages of sixpenny pulp fiction novels lay a world far removed from the grime and grind of life in a north-country English town. The American West, that place of mythical landscape and character limited only by the boundaries of the human imagination, was for him a means of escape from a world grey in its realism to the bluest of countries, the country of possibility, the country of romance. The romantic image of the West as a place of adventure, risk, and opportunity resonates through popular culture, perpetuated by the transfer of text to screen in the development of the western genre for television and cinema. The impact of the western in terms of how America defines itself culturally and is, in turn, defined by

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others, cannot be understated. It provides the basis for the stereotype of rugged individualism epitomized by the “true grit” cowboy, the quintessential American confronting his capacity for self-reliance in the most challenging of environments – the frontier. The image garners power not only from what it signifies about American culture, but also because it serves as a potent reminder of everything the other culture lacks.

Twenty years on, as a young college student discovering American literature for the first time, I found myself drawn to a cultural representation remarkably different from the one my grandfather found so captivating. In the modernist era, the West no longer provides the definitive source for imaging America. As the nation gains prominence, politically and economically, as materialism and consumerism replace exploration and discovery, the reversal of the traditional migratory pattern of manifest destiny culminates in the rise of the city as the new text for mirroring American society. In F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, the once mythical significance of the West is reduced to the obsolete, to the “ragged edge of the universe” as the metropolitan cityscape of New York emerges to replace the West as the center of the “wild promise of all the mystery and the beauty in the world” (7, 73). Just as Fitzgerald’s narrator experiences the “racy, adventurous feel” of the city, so, too, the reader discovers a new reading of the romance of American culture, a dynamism that stirs desire, creating, if only for a “transitory enchanted moment” (189), a sense of possibility unlike any other; and it is this flirtation, not only with the promise but also with the grandeur of that promise, no matter how illusory, that fuels the perception of America from the perspective of the other: the perspective of the old world (the grandfather), modernity (the granddaughter) and the millions like her who flock to the new world in search of their own American dream. Though the perception of American culture alters with time and exposure, the reading of it continues to evolve from a deep, abiding longing in the other for that which it lacks, be it material, spiritual, social, or political.

For a young woman whose national literature, as critic Richard Chase notes, projects the “middle brow” rendering of life, committed, as it were, to moral exactitude and renunciation, the lure of American literature, much like the country itself, proves irresistible (2). Yet the initial reading of the culture becomes complicated by the naivety of the reader’s response, a response influenced by the affective fallacy inherent in the romantic idealization and expectation she brings to the interpretation of the culture based on her reading or misreading of cultural codes emanating from a variety of texts. When the reader makes the transition from one culture to another by becoming an immigrant, she steps into the acculturation process and begins to formulate her own personal American Dream narrative. Through the developing stages of this narrative over time, she will encounter new signs that will inevitably alter and shape her perceptions of her newly adopted culture, both positively and negatively.

The dream and the reality: such is the dichotomy of the American culture. What the dichotomy reveals is the essential discrepancy and contradiction in what the reader believes the culture promises as opposed to what it delivers. The semiotic

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complexity evident in contemporary cultural propaganda creates a surreal world locked in a pristine promise that invites passive participation only; its actuality and attainability remain unrealized. In this sense, the American Dream as myth is perpetuated. Yet in addressing literature as a vehicle for reading culture, a more “real” rendering becomes possible because embedded in the multiple layers of meaning are the many diverse voices and experiences central to the making of American culture. In exploring the narratives of the immigrants who come to America in search of a better life, it becomes possible to understand the culture from within the realm of actual experience, culminating in a less romantic but more realistic portrait. In the process, the commonalities and differences inherent in the American experience emerge, offering a sense of not only the democratic promise of opportunity, but also the discrimination and exploitation that threatens to undermine and debilitate it.

The immigrant narrative lends itself well to a reading of American culture because it illustrates how ethnic and racial diversity influence the development of the culture through successive generations. Juxtaposed with the immigrant narrative, a narrative of voluntary participation in the American Dream, is the minority narrative, a body of discourses exposing the forced participation of African Americans and Native Americans through enslavement and displacement. In its most fundamental form, the minority narrative demonstrates the latent hypocrisy in a system advocating freedom and opportunity as “unalienable rights” yet failing to follow the ideology in practice, revealing the underbelly, the insidious flaw in the American Dream that creates exclusion, marginalization, and disenfranchisement. Yet within the narratives of oppression, the strains of self-reliance and resilience that co-exist with the elements of “alienation, contradiction, and disorder” characteristic of the American imagination emerge as compelling motivators for change (Chase 2).

A decade ago, when I began the teacher certification process in order to return to the classroom after a long absence, I was confronted with the realization that it was not, in fact, a return, but a new beginning. I would not be stepping back into that monocultural setting and its familiar literature, rather, something more diverse, whose identity was still very much a work in progress. Fifteen years of living in the United States had altered the romantic perspective that had informed my initial reading of the culture into one that was more detached, critical, aware of the irony implicit in the American experience. It was this sense of critical detachment that I wanted to develop in my students as they approached the study of their diverse cultural heritage through literature.

What I discovered to be true of the classroom experience reflects the old dichotomy of desire and reality inasmuch as what I wished to accomplish had to be reconciled with the reality of what the governing body, in this case the Texas Education Authority, deemed necessary in the curricula for high school students. The Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) objectives for the teaching of English Language Arts and Reading provide a sound, comprehensive base for the development of curricula. However, as the TEKS are measured by a standardized test, and schools are evaluated by student performances on the test, more often than

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not the test, not the TEKS, becomes the focus of what is taught in the classroom. The TEKS advocate “increasing student awareness of their own and other cultures through the reading of national and world literature with a view to recognizing distinctive and shared characteristics” (TEKS C10). Frequently, this translates into world literature, as in Classical and British, and American as it reflects the dominant white culture. Textbooks for the teaching of American literature, have, over recent decades, made a concerted effort to incorporate readings that more accurately reflect the ever-changing face of society. Yet teachers continue to teach what they know, what defines their comfort zone. This is due, in part, to how they have been trained in Schools of Education, where the predominant approach to cultural diversity more often than not involves a mandatory semester course in multiculturalism. Invariably, such courses principally address the need for inclusiveness as a means to providing educational equitability. As a result, course content, certainly in my experience, reflects a preoccupation with structural inequality and statistics that reveal its manifestations by race, class, and gender. What I felt to be the more pertinent need to address cultural differences and their impact on student learning, along with the teacher’s ability to understand and meet those needs, was simply not addressed. Only when I became involved in a class on immigrant and minority literature did I gain insight into how differences in cultural background affect individual experience and perception and how the transcendent quality of literature, its ability to communicate and build connections, makes it the ideal medium to reach across cultural barriers and establish a constructive environment for understanding and learning. The dry statistics of textbooks on multiculturalism and the visits to any number of restaurants to sample “cultural” cuisine paled in comparison to the insight and empathy created by the journey into the narratives of the people themselves.

When looking at the students who fill the seats in my classroom, I am aware that what appears before me is a microcosm of American society, a representation of the diversity of the nation. Many of the students are, like my own children, first generation Americans; they are bi-cultural; many are bi-lingual; primarily, they are middle and upper middle class, part of the growing suburban population whose parents are college-educated professionals, employees of Houston’s expansive medical care system, technology and petrochemical industries. In terms of their ethnicity, they are Asian - including Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, Indian, and Pakistani; Hispanic - mainly of Mexican descent; African American; White native Texans, and the children of transplanted northerners, who were part of the 1980s’ economic migration to the Sun Belt. As students in Advanced Placement classes, they are motivated to perform well in school, the result of a combination of personal competitiveness and parental influence and pressure. A few exceptional students will become Ivy Leaguers; a larger group will attend prestigious colleges across the nation; the majority will attend top tier schools in Texas. All of these factors indicate that their approach to course content, to the literature itself, emanates from a variety of concerns and objectives, and that their cultural diversity intrinsically influences how they perceive the culture at large.

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At the beginning of the school year, when asked how they view American culture or how they define what it is to be an American, the responses vary from the homespun patriotism of the land of the free to the materialistic land of opportunity. Invariably, their responses reflect not what they have read, but what they have absorbed from constant exposure to the media hype of the advertising and entertainment industries. One of my objectives, therefore, involves reading a broad range of fiction and non-fiction that will expose the students to differences in experience and perspective in the hope of moving them beyond a superficial understanding of American culture. Here I find it useful to consider the literary work as a product of its historical and social context. Essentially, connecting the text to the political, social, and economic circumstances that helped to create it gives the students a tangible reference point beyond the limits of their experience, thereby creating the possibility for a more objective point of view. Subsequently, it becomes possible to explore the opposing ideologies of Romanticism and Realism that permeate the literature, and how those ideals infiltrate American society, forming the basis of American Democracy, and whether those ideals hold true for all groups in terms of belief, practice, and achievability.

I introduce the course with two defining texts of the American Romantic movement, Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Emerson's *Selected Essays*. In reading Emerson, the students gain exposure to the concepts of self-reliance, individualism, nonconformity, and universalism, all concepts they understand to be innately connected to defining the American character, or at least the idealistic definition that feeds off what Richard Chase calls "the romance of the self" (2). Aside from the writings of the revolutionary period that expound the ideals integral to the framing of the Constitution, I find Emerson crucial in understanding the idealistic nuances in American thought that create opportunities for conflict and contradiction, leading to counter-culture movements, significantly, movements that will effect social change, such as the Abolitionist, Women's, and Civil Rights movements. When we move from the philosophical writings of Emerson to the fictional narrative of *The Scarlet Letter*, it becomes possible to test Emerson's ideology in the context of a time period - the Puritan era - whose Christian-based tenets of religious and social conformity stand in rigid counterpoint to Emerson's transcendental religion of the self. Hester Prynne, the conflicted heroine of Hawthorne's romance, essentially epitomizes not only the dichotomy of American Romanticism, but also the duality of the American character in her struggle to reconcile the irreconcilable: the desire for personal liberty and the equally strong desire for order and conformity to the group.

Initially, it is difficult for students of the millennium, self-professed Internet and iPod junkies, to recognize or understand the significance of Hester's struggle, removed as they are from the dilemmas of life in the pre-Modern era. However, they do recognize America as a culture where individual effort is the key to survival and success in a society that prizes individualism over collectivism. In this context, the students begin to recognize that Emerson's philosophy of self-reliance, of the struggle and worth of the individual becomes personified in Hester; that Hester's struggle involving personal sacrifice, the testing of loyalties to family and place, the

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risk of alienation to satisfy conscience, the willingness to leave what is familiar to satisfy a greater need effectively demonstrate the flaws and strengths, the experiences of the individual in American culture past and present. Intrinsically they understand that the characteristics defining Hester's struggle will, in varying degrees, find form in their personal struggles as they move towards fulfilling their own ambitions and dreams. When we move from Hester's story to the autobiographical slave narrative of Frederick Douglass, the students begin to explore how the democratic base they identify as integral to American society evolves, in part, through the determined struggle of the disenfranchised individual, the underdog, who challenges and opposes displacement and hypocrisy to demand a place for himself and others in the American Dream. Douglass's experiences and his refusal to be denied his human rights create for the students a sense of the underlying hope, the promise of an America that began with the Puritans' utopian vision of a promised land. Significantly, the *Narrative* provides an authentic account of a nightmarish dystopia, a parallel universe far removed from John Winthrop's envisioned utopic "city upon a hill." In discussing the *Narrative*, it becomes possible for the students to understand how the cultural democracy they take so much for granted today developed from a combination of philosophical idealism, the adversity of experience, and a prevailing consensus derived from hope towards the attainment of a common dream.

As the course transitions into the modern period, perhaps more than any other literary work *The Great Gatsby* emerges as the text students associate with American culture as they understand it: materialistic, opportunistic, and ambitious. The novel's delineation of the cult of consumerism and the ensuing rejection of the romantic ideals on which the country was founded resonates with cultural markers that are at once familiar to the students. In the narrative of Jay Gatsby's dream, echoes the dream of previous and successive generations: the desire for success in both personal and material terms. While the students recognize the role money plays in establishing or denying economic and social equity, they are less likely to perceive the depersonalization process that occurs when an individual becomes expendable, a commodity, a direct product of a society bent on commercialism and economic gain. What emerges for them is an example of an individual, in this case Gatsby, who is culpable, implicated in his fate through the choices he has made. They identify the characters as free agents capable of choice, rather than as victims of a system more powerful than they; moreover they identify with the concept of self-determination, seeing themselves as implicated in the material acquisitiveness of American culture, yet separate and exempt from the sense of moral bankruptcy that pervades the novel. Their criticism of Gatsby and his world reflects their attitude towards American society in general: they consider a life defined by the pursuit of money and pleasure hedonistic, lacking in purpose and social and moral substance. While they recognize the implicit role the pursuit of material wealth plays in the American Dream and lifestyle, they do not see it as a desirable substitute for worth derived from a life that exhibits purpose, and honors family, friendship, religion, and public service. In Gatsby's dream, they recognize and

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applaud the motivation and dedication that drives him towards his goal, yet they disapprove of the corrupt means by which he hopes to achieve it, scorning and even pitying the delusional naivety that drives his quest. Intrinsicly, they are critical of Gatsby's obsession with a romanticized past, seeing his sentimentality and optimism as symptoms of an unwillingness to face the realities of the present. When asked if their responses to "The Great Gatsby" may be read as a critique of today's society, their answer is a resounding "yes." They acknowledge the parallels between the materialism and hedonism of Fitzgerald's world and the equally materialistic and celebrity-obsessed culture of today. Resoundingly, though, they see themselves as separate from what they consider an aberration of today's mainstream culture, representative of it only in the sense that they wish to acquire the material means necessary to attain a higher standard of living. Essentially, they see the need for a consumer-driven lifestyle balanced by commitments to family, friendships, community, and nation; they understand the benefits of altruism, having given much of their time to volunteerism and community service. It is this ability to give, to see beyond themselves that creates an awareness of social responsibility, the beginnings of citizenship, and a sense of optimism in their outlook; whether they will be able to maintain that optimism as they shift from the sheltered environs of youth into the competitive complexity of adulthood remains to be seen.

While it is difficult for those jaded by experience and despairing of America's current role in world affairs to raise any semblance of optimism for the future, to declare that the American Dream is dead (if it ever really existed), it is perhaps worth recalling the attitudes of America's youth in the hope of understanding how that optimism, the hope of a dream continues to exist in a nation that in many respects appears to have lost its way. A modern-day Yeats might say that America is no country for old men, for old men may well have lost the ability to dream, to hope. My students believe that America is a country founded on hope and dreams, but it takes energy, drive, a willingness to take risks, and the investment of personal effort to realize something meaningful and productive from those hopes and dreams. They would direct any outside observer to consider America's past, whether through the narratives of the nation's literature or its history books, to review its turbulent history of conflict and struggle, to acknowledge that for every triumph there has been a tragedy, a miscarriage of justice of epic proportions. There has been great change wrought at the expense of human suffering, change stemming from a common goal, a consensual desire for what is fair; for what is right. Resoundingly, the students caution that America is not a panacea; rather, it is a constantly evolving experiment replete with opportunity for success and failure with no guarantee of either. As they see it, the important matter remains the very existence of opportunity, itself.

Certainly, there is much to be criticized in the American experience – a myopic sense of patriotism, an arrogance borne of the nation's youth and economic and political clout, a willfulness that promotes obstinacy at the expense of reflection and flexibility, an alarming propensity for myth-making – yet there remains much to be admired, including the conceptualization of a nation that derives its strength, its

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very existence from diversity, from a mosaic of ethnicities, creeds, and political beliefs. Like Gatsby's dream, there is something audacious, perhaps even delusional about the concept. Yet as my students quickly remind me, even through periods of darkness and doubt, gross error and neglect, the nation continues to evolve. Imperfect as it is, it retains a sense of promise, of potential that may be realized if its citizens invest themselves through personal effort and active citizenship in the democratic process.

As I conclude my journey and consider what I have learned about American culture courtesy of my students, their literature, and my interaction with both, I am reminded of Emerson's vision of America as a poem, a fitting metaphor for a country that continues to evolve, to re-invent itself, to challenge boundaries not so much to eliminate them as to re-define them in the interests of consensus. America is that hybrid poem, a combination of paradoxes, of contradictions and oppositions that would rival the most sophisticated metaphysical conceit; a poem versed in fragmentation and inversion; a poem whose rhythms reflect the voices of the people individually, in conflict, and in unison. One can easily be swept up in the rhetoric of America, to feel, like my grandfather before me, the lure of the romance of the country of the blue. But the romance that emanates from the narratives of the literature co-exists with the realism of the experiences that also informs the same narratives. In such a way, it becomes possible to understand the contradictions, the inequities, the dreams, and the realities that give life to American Culture.

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