

QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

Roxana MIHALACHE¹

¹University of Agronomy Sciences and Veterinary
Medicine of Iași,
e-mail: roxxanac@yahoo.com

Apparently, the American literature seems to be outgoing, materialistic and optimistic. But, in fact, it is profound, based on their eternal quest for their identity, beginning with Mark Twain, William Faulkner, Henry James and finishing with Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller. The American literature seems fascinated with the outcast, the person who defies tradition in order to arrive at some knowledge, some personal integrity.

The paper has in view the identification of the American authors interested in this recurrent issue and a contrastive analysis of their works, pointing out the peculiarities of each one.

Key words: American literature, Mark Twain, William Faulkner

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The basic materials for the research consisted in the writings and works of American authors belonging to the 20th century. The working methods we used were the selection of texts and authors, text contrastive analysis as well as the interpretation of the works under study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Throughout the world, many people think of Americans as being outgoing, materialistic and optimistic. There is some truth in this general impression, but American literature at its best has rarely been the product of such Americans. Even in the 18th century there were skeptics and by the end of the 19th century the complacent, optimistic tone of the popular poets and novelists had been challenged by Mark Twain, William Faulkner, St. Crane, H. James and N. Hawthorne, to name only the best known. The writing of the first quarter of the 20th century shows that the American dream is illusory.

American Novel

The tradition of the quest is an ancient narrative tradition, perhaps the most profound in western fiction. Dedalus, Huck, Quentin Compson place themselves outside the bounds of what is known and seek not stability but a truth which is unwrapped by stability. American literature seems fascinated with the outcast, the person who defies traditions in order to arrive at some knowledge, some personal integrity.

Thus, Mark Twain's Huck becomes a self proclaimed social outlaw, because he finally decides to "go to hell" i.e. to defy the laws of man and to remain loyal to

his Negro friend, Jim. He undergoes a moral testing and development. Urged by affection, he discards the moral code he has always taken for granted and resolves to help Jim in his escape from slavery. The intensity of his inner struggle suggests how deeply he is involved in the society he rejects.

William Faulkner's fiction reveals a tragic sense of man's failure to attain his ideals or in some instances, of his failure to cherish any real ideal. The part is seen as a powerful force still acting upon his character's fate or upon their inner life.

The novel *The Sound and the Fury* traces the decaying values of the Southern society in which it's based, while also tracking the desperation and hopelessness of individuals (the three brothers of the Compson family) as they each try, in their own way, to mourn the loss of their sister, Caddy. Caddy's sexuality, her early pregnancy, and her quick and unhappy marriage are the obscured heart of this novel: everything else happens after (and as a response to) the actions of Caddy.

Ironically, Caddy is the one Compson who's *not* given a section of the novel in which to explore her own story. Instead, Faulkner allows the center of the novel to exist as a gaping hole, one which various narrators attempt to fill with their own memories of the past.

Quentin Compson from *The Sound and the Fury* is the idealistic thinker, a sensitive introvert. The character's absorption in the past is defined as a loss of self and personality, as the equivalent of death and makes Quentin's suicide appear as a logical development. Quentin is obsessed with the past and time, he repudiates the future, he would like to kill time and make it stop at one changeless moment, the moment of happiness when he was together with Caddy.

The 1st World War changed the outlook of all Americans. it intensified the pessimism and disenchantment with what was peculiarly American and it lead to wide spread expatriation. A typical example is **Henry James**. In all his writings he was interested in the subjective adventure of the individual, in his attempt at defining himself. Isabelle Archer's (*The Portrait of a Lady*) drama is one of lost illusions and cheated confidence.

This novel is the most stunning achievement of Henry James's early period--in the 1860s and '70s when he was transforming himself from a talented young American into a resident of Europe, a citizen of the world, and one of the greatest novelists of modern times. A kind of delight at the success of this transformation informs every page of this masterpiece. Isabel Archer, a beautiful, intelligent, and headstrong American girl newly endowed with wealth and embarked in Europe on a treacherous journey to self-knowledge, is delineated with a magnificence that is at once casual and tense with force and insight. The characters with whom she is entangled--the good man and the evil one, between whom she wavers, and the mysterious witch-like woman with whom she must do battle--are each rendered with a virtuosity that suggests dazzling imaginative powers. The way from innocence, from naivety to experience is marked by moments of disappointment by

a frustrating sense of being cheated. She goes through a painful process of initiation.

The question of knowledge and self-knowledge is also present in H. James's *The Ambassadors*, where man is confronted with himself and the others. Lambert Strether, a middle-aged man from Massachusetts, agrees to take on a mission for his wealthy fiancée: to go to Paris and rescue her son Chad Newsome from the clutches of a presumably wicked woman. On his journey, Strether stops in England and meets Maria Gostrey, an American woman who has lived in Paris for many years. Her cynical wit and worldly-wise opinions start to rattle Strether's preconceived view of the situation. In Paris, Strether meets Chad and is impressed by Marie de Vionnet, a lovely woman of impeccable manners, and her exquisite daughter Jeanne. Strether is confused as to whether Chad is more attracted to the mother or the daughter. At the same time, Strether himself feels an overwhelming attraction to Marie de Vionnet. Strether starts to delight in the loveliness of Paris and actually stops Chad from returning to America. Strether's American traveling companion, Waymarsh, provides a counterpoint, refusing to be seduced by the charms of Europe. Meanwhile, Mrs. Newsome, Strether's fiancée and Chad's mother, waiting impatiently back in the States, enlists new "ambassadors" to bring back Chad forthwith. In the end Strether realizes the full extent of the pair's romantic involvement. But Strether finds that he is no longer comfortable in Europe, but nor in America.

Anxiety, discontent, various other versions of alienation are prevalent in contemporary American fiction: **Salinger's** Holden Caulfield, **R. Ellison's** *Invisible Man* and **S. Bellow's** Herzog remain rebels and loners to the end. Their dominant aspect is that of the rebel-victim. Holden's quest is of different kinds: a quest to preserve an innocence that is in peril of vanishing – the innocence of childhood, a quest for an ideal, a quest for relationship, for communication. Holden's journey is more than movement through space; it is also a movement from innocence to knowledge, from self ignorance to self awareness. Holden seeks Virtue second to Love. He wants to be good. When the little children are playing in the rye-field on the clifftop, Holden wants to be the one who catches them before they fall off the cliff. He is not driven toward honor or courage. He is not driven toward love of woman. Holden is driven toward love of his fellow man, charity—virtues which were perhaps not quite virile enough Ishmael, Huck Finn, or Nick Adams.. But like these American heroes, Holden is a wanderer, for in order to be good he has to be more of a bad boy than the puritanical Huck could have imagined. Holden has had enough of both Hannibal, Missouri, and the Mississippi; and his tragedy is that when he starts back up the river, he has no place to go—save, of course, a California psychiatrist's couch.

R. Ellison's *Invisible Man* has as dominant issue the African American experience. However, important is not the difficulty of being black, but also the experience of being black and essentially without identity or „invisible”, in a world where “others refuse to see me”. Ellison's use of character's emphasizes the problems faced by the unnamed narrator of *Invisible man*. Although the many

characters offer him diverse roles or ways of being, they do not present him with satisfactory identity. What the narrator discovers and accepts is that a true sense of racial identity for the African American may be impossible. The quest for true identity cannot be satisfied by choosing to become a stereotype or what others expect him to be. Instead, the “invisible man” must accept his invisibility and begin to from that point to define himself by his moral choices.

Saul Bellow’s novel called *Herzog* is full of sadness and search. Moses Herzog is betrayed by everyone close to him. Trying to forget that everything around is beginning to disintegrate (he has failed as a writer, father and husband), he is unceasingly writing letters to anyone: friends, enemies, colleagues, relatives, politicians and even the dead. The letters never get in an envelope. The words rotten on papers forgotten here and there. Other times he writes in his mind, trying to understand the world and himself, trying to find this identity.

American Short-story

The quest for identity is also well represented in the American short-story. As the writers deal with fragments of life, they try to reveal as much of the mystery of existence as possible.

Washington Irving wrote *Rip Van Winkle* with the American people in mind. At this time society was changing drastically. America was attempting to go through a struggle with forming their own identity. America was wanting to have an identity that would set them free from English culture and rule. Irving uses his main character, Rip Van Winkle, to symbolize America. Rip goes through the same struggles that America was going through at this time before and after the Revolution. Irving uses such great symbolism in this story to describe the changes that American society went through. This story covers a wide variety of time periods including: America before English rule, early American colonies under English rule, and America after the Revolutionary War.

One main issue of the story was one of identity, especially at this time in history. Rip was having difficulty finding himself throughout the story. His wife constantly nagged at him probably all in good reason. His farm was fading away. He was lazy and unproductive. He underwent many emotional changes throughout the story. He didn't appreciate what he had, and before he could even blink it was gone. Life is too short to not appreciate everything in it and enjoy it to the fullest.

Rip Van Winkle can find his place neither in his world, nor in the new one; that is why, in the end, he becomes a story-teller, in order to construct his identity through story-telling.

N. Hawthorne’s *My kinsman, Major Molineux* is seen as an allegory. Although it can be interpreted as an initiation ceremony, there are elements that point to the quest for identity. Nathaniel Hawthorne uses ambiguity, as well as other writing tools, to tell a pre-Revolutionary war story about a young man's journey from childhood innocence into the adult world of evils and reality. Hawthorne utilizes the power of setting, symbolism, and conflict, to name a few, to help portray the problem of knowing that is ever present through out the stories' entirety. Foremost it is important to know the main character of the story: young

Robin is on a journey from the country into town to find his kinsman, the Major Molineux. Robin's character is round in that it is complex and dynamic. He changes from the innocent youth he is in the beginning to an adult educated in the ways of evil and harshness. The main character, Robin, makes his promises and abandons his loyalties in order to avoid rejection and to feel himself at one with his society; but when the mob has passed, he becomes aware of his betrayal of himself. He lost his individuality, his identity the moment he joined the mob. Even though at the end of the story Robin claims that he wants to return home, there is no way back for him.

Herman Melville's *Bartleby, the Scrivener* is another example in point. The story has been interpreted by critics in numerous ways. Most have viewed it as a work of social criticism dealing with the psychological effects of capitalism as it existed in the 1850s. Others have viewed it as a philosophical meditation on the human condition, or as a religious parable on religion itself. However one interprets its ultimate meaning, the story provides an exploration into such universal issues of the human experience as alienation, passivity, nonconformity, and psychological imprisonment. The story's enduring appeal largely stems from its well-crafted ambiguity. Bartleby has become a robotic copyist in a world surrounded by walls: he has lost his identity because of the environment, because of non-communication; but the decision he takes may not be considered a common one: he gives up fighting, he wants to die. At the time of his death, he rejects food and normal human interaction. He is a victim of society for whom there can be no salvation. Loss of identity, human alienation in modern society, lack of communication led him to death.

The main conflict in **Sarah Orne Jervett's** *The White Heron* is between culture, nature and civilization. It is the story of a young forest-dwelling girl who must choose whether or not to tell a handsome young hunter the secret of where the rare white heron has its nest. It was immediately recognized by critics as a treasure. There is an atmosphere of natural termination: the woods are filled with shadows i.e. the end of a cycle, the end of a way of life. If, at first Sylvia is the epitome of nature, at a certain moment she is between nature and civilization. In fact it is all about telling or not telling a secret: if she tells it, she will no longer be a part of the nature; if she doesn't, it is almost of no importance as she cannot stop time and the changing of things. So, she chooses a third option: to keep silence; but by doing that, she remains outside time, outside history. The end of the story is representative for her loss of identity; she is "this lonely county child": she belongs to neither of the worlds.

In *The Open Boat* **Stephen Crane** displays the actions and emotions of four men facing death at sea. Like nearly all of Crane's work, it exists in a world incapable of presenting meaningfulness or even organization. Through the hard work the men do to stay alive in the dinghy, they repeatedly find false hints of rescue. In the little boat, there are no truths, and there is nothing to definitely know. In resolution, toil and suffering for survival is not rewarded. As the story begins, the men do not know the significance of their lives, only that they must work in the

boat to stay alive. The whole story is dominated by a feeling of indifference; the nature seems to ignore them (the agents of the universe are hostile: the waves, the gulls, the shark and even the tourists on the shore). The correspondent's answer to the absurdity of life is grotesque, is a scornful laughter at the childish conception of right and wrong and parental admonitions. He cannot distinguish between right and wrong and understands nothing "in his new ignorance".

American Drama

The American drama underwent permanent experiments until it found its climax and fulfillment. Some of the leading American dramatists such as Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller, and Tennessee Williams had remarkable creations of the genre. **E. O'Neill** was deeply interested in existential questions and the main theme of his plays is man's struggle to understand his place in the universe. Yank from *The Hairy Ape* is in a broader sense a symbol of mankind itself. Tied to his animal origin man still aspires towards a higher existence. His basic search is for a realm to which he can "belong". Yank, failing to find his home in the higher regions attempts to descend into the animal world. The unthinking brutes, however, destroy him as an interloper. Man is forever condemned to live an existence midway between the animal and the divine.. In *Long Day's Journey into Night*, the writer portrayed troubled families, where illusions, vulnerability and morality clashed. *Long Day's Journey into Night* is not only a journey forward in time, but also a journey back into the past lives of all the characters, who continually dip back into their old lifestyles. We are left as an audience realizing that the family is not making progress towards betterment, but rather continually sliding into despair, as they remain bound to a past that they can neither forget nor forgive.

At the same time, **Tennessee Williams** quarreled with God for producing a creation in which cruelty and want were so apparent. Among the most prominent and urgent themes of *The Glass Menagerie* is the difficulty the characters have in accepting and relating to reality. Each member of the Wingfield family is unable to overcome this difficulty, and each, as a result, withdraws into a private world of illusion where he or she finds the comfort and meaning that the real world does not seem to offer. Of the three Wingfields, reality has by far the weakest grasp on Laura. Laura, a young girl, being rejected by the suitor her mother would have wanted, desperately turns to her collection of fragile glass animals for comfort and companionship. The private world in which she lives is populated by glass animals—objects that, like Laura's inner life, are incredibly fanciful and dangerously delicate.

Most of **Arthur Miller's** characters are in search for their identity, suffering crises of consciousness they are confronted with a situation that they are incapable of meeting. The famous Willy Lowman (*Death of a Salesman*) and Joe Keller (*All My Sons*) like other characters end in death by their lack of self-understanding. All of them are victims. Some critics criticized Miller for infusing the play *Death of a Salesman* with a deep sense of pity for the commonplace salesman Willy Loman. They insisted that Willy was a "little man" and therefore not worthy of the pathos reserved for such tragic heroes as Oedipus and Medea. Miller, however, argued

that the tragic feeling is invoked whenever we are in the presence of a character, any character, who is ready to sacrifice his life, if need be, to secure one thing--his sense of personal dignity. And the "little" salesman was determined to do just that, no matter what the cost. A. Miller presents the crisis as a conflict between the uncomprehending self and the social and economic structure.

Investigations of human nature and human plight, the attempt of defining man's identity are recurrent themes in American literature.

CONCLUSIONS

The quest for identity has been present in the novels, short-stories and drama of the American writers since the 18th century.

Through the study of most of the works, we can draw the following conclusions:

1. The American novel, represented by M. Twain, W. Faulkner, H. James, Salinger, Ellison and Bellow is characterized either by hopeless and despaired individuals (Q. Compson, H. Caulfield, Herzog) or by innocent, naïve characters (Huck, Strether), all seeking their identity.
2. As regards the American short-story, the writers deal with fragments of life where they try to reveal as much of the mystery of existence as possible.
3. The American playwrights have characters that suffer crises of consciousness, have difficulties in accepting the reality and finding their place in the universe.

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