

## 1. BEGINNINGS OF MODERN AMERICAN FICTION

After the positive vision of the world presented by Transcendentalists there were three writers who expressed their doubts and disbelief in the American optimism and progress. Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849), Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804–1864) and Herman Melville (1810–1891) searched the darker aspects of human existence, American past and nature.

NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE was born in Salem, Massachusetts to a prominent New England family. This is also a region where he set most of his stories. His fiction deals mainly with his Puritan heritage, on one hand he was proud of his ancestors, yet he also felt guilt, especially because one of his forefathers John Hathorne was a judge in Salem witchcraft trials. His father died when he was four and his mother never recovered from the shock. Among his school friends belonged Longfellow and Franklin Pierce, who became the 14th American president. Hawthorne thus spent most of his time at home, reading and writing. In 1828 he published his first novel *Fanshawe: A Tale* which was an attempt at Gothic novel with autobiographical features. It was published anonymously at his own expense. It was a failure and he even tried to destroy all copies. More successful was his first collection of stories *Twice-Told Tales* (1837, enlarged version 1842) which contains some of his best stories, such as „The Maypole of Merrymount“ or „Endicott and the Red Cross“. In the following years, Hawthorne joined the Transcendentalist experiment and went to communal living at Brook Farm. Yet he soon left and his experience allegorically described in *Blithedale Romance* (1852). The story is a ironic comedy and utopia with a tragic ending. A pragmatic prison reformer Hollingsworth is too enthusiastic for his ideas that he isolates the whole community from the rest of the world, another character is a fanatical feminist Zenobie and unsure and doubting narrator Coverdale. He moved with his wife Sophia Peabody who was a member of the Transcendentalist movement to Concord where they stayed in the Old Manse, former Emerson's residence. There he published his second collection of short stories *Mosses from an Old Manse* (1846), including „Young Goodman Brown“, „Rappacini's Daughter“ and „Roger Malvin's Burial“

Though he became known for his stories, his most influential book was a romance *The Scarlett Letter*. The novel was published in 1850 with a famous introduction where the author explains how and why he started writing the book. It is called „Custom-house“, at that time Hawthorne worked at customs in Boston.

Hawthorne sketched the character of its protagonist Hester Prynne already in a short story „Endicott and the Red Cross“. There is a woman who has to wear a letter A as a sign of her adultery, later she embroiders it with scarlet cloth to make it mean Angel or Admirable.

The romance is set in a Puritan community and starts where all love stories usually end: When the love affair of Hester Prynne and Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale is over and Hester is having an illegitimate child, Pearl. Hester rather wears the scarlet A (for adulteress) for years than to areveal who is the father of her child. Her husband, Roger Chillingworth, who arrives from Europe, tortures Arthur until he confesses his adultery before dying in Hester's arms. The character of Hester Prynne was probably modeled on feminists such as Anne Hutchinson or Margaret Fuller. Hester is also often seen as an American version of Anna Karenina and influenced many

independent female characters as in Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) or in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899)

In 1851 he published his most realistic romance, *House of Seven Gables*. He was also known as a writer for children: *Grandfather's Chair* (1841) and *Biographical Stories* (1842), and *Wonder-Book for Girls and Boys* (1852) where he retells the Greek myths of Midas, Pandora, Hercules, the Chimera, of Baucis and Philemon, of Perseus and Medusa. A second series of classical myths presented in the same entertaining manner appeared in *Tanglewood Tales* (1853).

In 1853 he moved to Europe where he worked as a counsel in Liverpool. He published non fiction *English Notebooks* where he concentrates on the influence of England on American imagination. In 1857 he left England and settled in Rome and Florence. There he wrote his last finished romance *The Marble Faun* (1860) which is set in Rome, a city of Catholic religion, art and disgrace. The protagonist is a faun Donatello who is coming from the ancient, innocent ages to re-enact the story of fall from innocence to experience. Once again is Hawthorne concentrating on the effects of sin on human body and soul. This will be a topic taken up by one of Hawthorne's friends, Herman Melville, especially in *Billy Bud*.

When Hawthorne returned, he was greatly disappointed with the development of American politics. In 1863 he published *Our Old Home*, which is based on entries from his English notebooks. Despite protests, he dedicated the book to Franklin Pierce.

#### HERMAN MELVILLE

Herman Melville was born into an eminent family claiming war heroes and wealthy merchants on 1 August 1819 in New York City, New York State. He had seven brothers and sisters. The father loved to tell his children sea-faring tales of terror and adventure, and of places far away. He died when Melville was twelve and the family moved to the village of Lansingburg, on the banks of the Hudson River.

In 1835 Melville attended the Albany Classical School for a year, then moved to Pittsfield, Massachusetts to work at the farm of his uncle, gentleman farmer Thomas Melville. It was not long however that Melville travelled back to New York and secured his place as cabin boy on a ship bound for Liverpool, England. Upon return to New York he held various unsatisfying jobs until he next set sail on the whaling ship *Acushnet* in 1841. His stay in the Marquesas Islands (now French Polynesia) with his friend Richard Tobias Greene would provide much fodder for his future novels. First published in England, *Typee* and *Omoo* (1847) are based on Melville's sea-faring adventures and stays in Polynesia and Tahiti. His next novel *Mardi: and A Voyage Thither* (two volumes, 1849) is 'a romance of Polynesian adventure', again reflecting much of Melville's own life on ships and the South Seas. It is a philosophical and allegorical story. The protagonist Taji visits satirized European countries. He travels with Babbalanja, the philosopher, Yoomy the poet and other characters. He falls in love with a mysterious white woman Yillah. He rescues her from sacrifice and takes her to Mardi, a beautiful place where they enjoy their love. Then she disappears and he keeps looking for her. The book thematically precedes *Moby Dick* but it was not successful. Melville thus realized that if he wanted to be remembered for more serious fiction than his *Typee*, he must combine philosophy and action.

He then published two novels *Redburn: His First Voyage* (1850) and *White-Jacket; or the World of Man-of-War* (1850). Both were based on his experience.

On 4 August 1847 Melville married Elizabeth Shaw, with whom he would have four children. In 1850 the Melvilles moved to what would be their home for the next thirteen years, 'Arrowhead' (now designated a National Historic Landmark) in Pittsfield, Berkshire County, Massachusetts. It was here that Melville made the acquaintance of fellow New Englander [Nathaniel Hawthorne](#)--he would become a great friend to Melville, and to whom he dedicated *Moby Dick*. It was the beginning of a prolific period of writing for Melville. He wrote sketches for such journals as *Putnam's Monthly* including "The Piazza" and "I and My Chimney", and started on his masterpiece *Moby Dick*. After the publication of *Moby Dick* in October of 1851, Melville was seeing positive reviews of his works in England and America, readers captivated by his authentic story telling of exotic adventures, although he struggled with self-doubt.

He was influenced by Hawthorne, by an article published in *Knickerbocker Magazine* „Mocha Dick; or The White Whale of the Pacific“ by J. N. Reynolds and a book *Narrative of the Most Extraordinary and Distressing Shipwreck of the Whale-Ship Essex* by Owen Chase. He was also inspired by epics of Homer, Chamois and William Shakespeare. Melville's captain Ahab pursues the whale and in one scene he talks to a skeleton of a whale, his black cabin boy Pip turns insane. Melville was also inspired by Shakespeare's style.

They sail on a ship Pequod, a company of people of all races, „a deportation from all the isles of the sea, all the ends of the earth.“ „It is the ship of America: embarked on an enterprise that is a curious mixture of the mercantile and the moral, imperial conquest and (ir)religious crusade - and precariously balanced between the notions of community and freedom. [...] So, like the letter ‚A‘ in Hawthorne's story, its determining characteristic is its indeterminacy. How it is seen as being and meaning, depend entirely on who is seeing it.“ (Gray 210-211)

For Ahab *Moby Dick* stands for all that he denies, pushes away from his consciousness. He wants to take revenge on the creature that took his leg. He believes in his almighty power to conquer the animal which he hates. He rebels against the natural order. Second essential character is Ishmael. The book opens with famous „Call me Ishmael“, he is a man of no past, true American. He is also the only one who survives on a coffin made by his close friend, a Polynesian harpooner Queequeg.

At that time, *Moby Dick* was not very successful and Melville started working on *Pierre; or The Ambiguities*. The story was a romance with elements of mystery and horror. The whole book ends with death of the protagonist and his half-sister, alluding to Poe's dark stories.

His other works including *The Encantadas; or, Enchanted Isles* (novella, 1854), *Israel Potter* (1855), *Piazza Tales* (1856), and *The Confidence Man* (1857) were not commercially successful. In previous years he had travelled throughout Europe and the Holy Land; in 1857 he launched into a three year lecture tour of major North American cities where he spoke of his writings and travels.

In 1863 the Melville moved back to New York City. He started working at the New York Custom House. Almost ten years since his last published novel, Melville was

now writing poetry. He published *Battle Pieces* (1866), *Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land* (1876), *John Marr and Other Poems* (1888), and *Timoleon* (1891).

### The Fall of Richmond

The tidings received in the Northern Metropolis.

(April, 1865.)

What mean these peals from every tower,

And crowds like seas that sway?

The cannon reply; they speak the heart

Of the People impassioned, and say--

A city in flags for a city in flames,

Richmond goes Babylon's way--

Sing and pray.

O weary years and woeful wars,

And armies in the grave;

But hearts unquelled at last deter

The helmed dilated Lucifer--

Honor to Grant the brave,

Whose three stars now like Orion's rise

When wreck is on the wave--

Bless his glaive.

Well that the faith we firmly kept,

And never our aim forswore

For the Terrors that trooped from each recess

When fainting we fought in the Wilderness,

And Hell made loud hurrah;

But God is in Heaven, and Grant in the Town,

And Right through might is Law--

God's way adore.

Melville was after his death largely forgotten as well many other writers who are now being rediscovered, mainly by feminist criticism. One of the exceptions was Harriet Beecher Stowe.

HARRIET BEECHER STOWE (1811–1896) was born in Connecticut, to a family of a Calvinist preacher. She studied at a female seminary in Cincinnati that was founded by her sister Catharine Beecher and later started teaching there. She began writing stories that were collected in *The Mayflower: Sketches and Scenes and Characters Among the Descendants of the Puritans* (1843). In Cincinnati Stowe met many run-away slaves and became interested in abolitionism and in 1845 published an essay „Immediate Emancipation“. Her most celebrated work was her novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). It started as a series of sketches for anti-slavery magazine *National Era*. It soon became the best-selling book after Bible. Stowe managed to combine plantation story, romance and slave narrative. Her novel was so influential, that even Abraham Lincoln remarked that „the little lady who wrote the book that made this great war.“ The book was praised mainly for its moral message that for artistic reasons. In the South, the book had an opposite effect. There were many novels defending slavery and showing the idyllic happy lives on plantations.

The protagonist of Stowe's novel is Uncle Tom, obedient and loyal slave who is separated from his family and sold to Southern plantation. He lives there quite happily, but when his masters die, he is sold to a cruel master. Once Tom refuses to tell where two female slaves hide and he is whipped to death. The son of his former master finds out and is determined to free all his slaves.

Stowe showed slavery as anti-American and anti-democratic. She sees slavery as an inhuman system dividing families and reducing men to property. Tom is presented as a innocent and harmless person who refuses doing wrong things to anyone, his masters included. He is a saintly, Christ-figure. The term „Uncle Tom“ has become to denote a too servile and meek person.

One year later, in 1853, she published *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, where she was defending her novel and tried to prove that she was using narratives of slaves. She was inspired mainly by two books: *The Narrative of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845) and William Wells Brown's *Clotel; or the President's Daughter* (1853), the first novel written by African American. The novel tells a story of a daughter of Thomas Jefferson and his black maid.

In 1856 Stowe published another novel on slavery *Dred: A Tale of Dismal Swamp*. This novel shows the effects of slavery on the white masters.

In her later works she turned to romantic fiction, as in *The Minister's Wooing*, or *Agnes of Sorrento*. She was a moralistic and didactic writer who managed to combine her moral message with popular genres.