

# **The Indian captive as an early manifestation of the American Hero**

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## **[1] Preliminary remarks**

Robert Bellah's observation: "American history, like the history of any people, has within it archetypal patterns that reflect the general condition of human beings as pilgrims and wanderers on this earth" not only reinforces Joseph Campbell's hero's journey Monomyth, but it provides a fertile theoretical apparatus for the examination of the topic indicated in the address of the present essay. As Campbell asserts the mythological hero is lured at the threshold of adventure, then s(he) is either carried away or voluntarily proceeds further. On the journey the hero can be accompanied either by threatening forces putting him to a test, or helpers providing magical aid. The nadir of the mythological round is the supreme ordeal. After surviving the ordeal the triumphant return can be accompanied by apotheosis and freedom implying atonement or divinization along with transfiguration and expansion of consciousness respectively (227–28).

The American myth of origin as an expression of the covenant theology positing a direct relationship between God and the representatives of a chosen nation can also be interpreted in a similar manner. Consequently, as an illustration of the conflation of individual fate and communal destiny, chosen people give rise to a chosen nation whose mission is to convey redemption to other peoples or cultures via a divine errand. The "thousand faced" Campbellian hero is part and parcel of the American myth of origin as well. As several researchers including Richard Slotkin and more recently Susan Faludi have posited the Indian captivity narrative as one of the manifestations of the American myth of

origin, the forthcoming essay will examine how the American hero is presented in such narratives of confinement.

The study will not single out any particular text, but will concentrate on the captivity narrative as a genre. Spanning over three centuries the following texts will be used as reference points: “Captivity of Father Isaac Jogues of the Society of Jesus, Among the Mohawks” (1643), “A Faithful Narrative of the Many Dangers and Sufferings, as well as Wonderful and Surprizing Deliverances of Robert Eastburn, During his Late Captivity Among the Indians” (1755, “The Sovereignty and Goodness of God... being a Narrative of the Captivity and Restauration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson.”(1682), and “A Narrative of the Capture and Subsequent Sufferings of Mrs. Rachel Plummer, Written by Herself” (1836). The chronological terrain includes the early years of the colonial period, King Philip’s War, the American Revolution, and the rise of an independent political and literary culture. The examination will employ a theoretical research apparatus including the works of such leading figures of myth criticism as s Joseph Campbell, Daniel Hoffman, and Leslie Fiedler.

## **[2] The Indian captive as the American hero**

The American hero is inseparable from the American myth of origin. Ever since its appearance on the global cultural scene the American hero has become an object of fascination both for professional and lay observers of American culture. While these days the American hero is primarily projected via the electronic media and the channels of popular culture, said figure has a long history during which the protagonist of Indian captivity narratives is considered but one milestone. John Smith captured by the Powhatan Indians in 1608 and overcoming all obstacles, becoming triumphant against all odds, while propagating the values of a newly formed settler society offers a prototype of the respective cultural figure. Other relevant manifestations include the hunter as illustrated by Benjamin Church’s *Entertaining Passages* or the Daniel Boone narrative, known as “the first literary vaulting over the hedge” (Slotkin *Regeneration* 177).

The Indian captivity narrative reflecting the concept of messianic mission, elected status and a heliotropic view of cultural evolution is one of the primary manifestations of the American myth of origin. The Indian

captive displayed a variety of features and personal fortitude similar to his or her counterparts commemorated by such leading figures of American literary culture as James Fenimore Cooper, Herman Melville, and Mark Twain. The main characteristics of the Indian captive resonated in Natty Bumppo, both as an inverted Robinson and sufferer of captivity himself, in Melville's Ishmael, whose existential musings at sea form a parallel with the reluctant admiration felt by the Indian captive attempting to find his or her bearings after the ambush and in the course of the subsequent forced march across the wilderness. Furthermore, Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn also bears resemblance to the topic of our inquiry via his encounter, of course on a much more friendly terms, with the ethno-racial Other.

While discussing the various features of the American hero, the very adjective has to be handled with a certain degree of caution as in captivity narratives originating in the colonial period the captives refer to themselves as English and allusions to being American can only be found in texts produced after the American Revolution. The concept of being chosen appears as a central consideration in case of the American myth of origin and its cultural and literary reification, the American hero. In the respective cultural context the pilgrimage alluded to by Bellah refers to the rise of a nation of chosen people from a set of elected individuals. Just like Daniel Hoffman presents the American hero as a figurative cultural orphan, the American myth of origin has no professed European roots or parents, it breaks away from the continental pattern of cultural evolution, and presents a novel paradigm of organic culture development.

Inspired by Bellah I propose that the American myth of origin compels its protagonist to embark upon the respective pilgrimage. The pilgrim is called upon an errand in the wilderness eventually facilitating the promotion of Anglo-Saxon democracy and the promulgation of the tenets of Christianity. The Indian captive is one of the early variations of Bellah's pilgrim, or by extension, the American hero. Moreover, reinforcing Bellah's conviction, Slotkin considers the Indian captive the first mythological hero of American culture (*Regeneration* 21).

The trials and tribulations of the Indian captive retrace the stations of the hero journey outlined by Campbell. The commemoration of the adventure serves more than mere entertainment purposes as it provides an explanation for the rise of the American nation.

Slotkin envisions a rotating cycle of regeneration and violence during which not only the frontier was populated by settlers, but a rapid

economic, cultural, and political development was triggered. The hero's journey not only includes a series of physical and psychological tests, but leads to redemption as well. Interpreted on the macro-social level the crossing of the threshold of adventure launches the community or nation building process.

The Indian captive as the American hero not only puts on one of the "thousand faces" of Campbell's model, but functions as the emissary of the American value system. Consequently, in addition to being a manifestation of the American Adam, "a hero dissociated from its past," the Indian captive reflects such crucial components of the American value system as individualism, liberty, democracy, equality, and mobility.

The expression of individualism ranges from the characteristics of the very genre via the description of the captive's abandoned position to authorial musings on the value of physical and psychological suffering. The captivity narrative as one of the early forms of American autobiography reaffirms the psychological rewards in describing an image of the self along with the writer's conviction of his or her experiences' worthiness for presentation to the public (Séllei 19). Just as the American myth of origin inscribes its protagonist, that is creates its own hero via being chosen, the very act of captivity leads to the reaffirmation of identity.

The captivity narrative became one of the crucial examples of life writing in the early Republic. The onset of Romanticism with its unwavering faith in the individual coincided with the American tendency of the celebration of the self in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Consequently, inspired by the two principal autobiographical documents of America, the Declaration of Independence (1776) and the United States Constitution (1787) along with the literary achievements of the leading figures of the American Renaissance autobiography became the principal means of expression for the less powerful or the marginalized as well. Walt Whitman's remarks in "Democratic Vistas" (1870): "The key to American development had been 'personalism' or the perfect uncontamination and solitariness of individuality" provided powerful explanation for the proliferation of life writing texts.

The prominence of the individualist impulse is substantiated by the commemoration of the physical abandonment and psychological/spiritual isolation of the captive. The rendering of the captive as a solitary representative of settler society and of Christian religion among nomadic heathens combines personal suffering with redemption on the macro-

social and geo-political level. Mrs. Rowlandson's lament is instructive: "The Indians were as thick as the trees: it seemed as if there had been a thousand Hatchets going at once [...] I my self in the midst, and no Christian soul near me, and yet how hath the Lord preserved me in safety?" (445) Being torn away from the original family and/or kinship network calls for the deployment of a variety of problem solving skills including narrative construction as a way of controlling the seemingly unstoppable flow of events.

The concept of "redemptive suffering" is a central component of captivity narratives. Physical tribulations imply withstanding deprivation and making adjustments to radically different living conditions. The captive crosses several borders including political, racial, cultural, and ecological dividing lines. One of the illustrations of the dramatic modification of the captive's living conditions is Mary Rowlandson's forced immersion into nature involving being forced to cross the river barefoot and her self-imposed starvation. Another source of suffering is physical abuse including the submission of the captive to the gauntlet as demonstrated by the fate of Isaac Jogues and Robert Eastburn. It is noteworthy, however, that unlike their male counterparts, female captives are not as frequently exposed to physical violence. One possible exception could be the Comanche tying and beating Rachel Plummer. It is hardly beyond doubt that witnessing the suffering or eventual deaths of their children cause the most anguish for female captives.

The very fact of suffering forces the victim of the captivity experience to seek explanations for his or her fate. The most frequently deployed justification is primarily of religious nature reinforcing the doctrines of Puritanism as Mary Rowlandson finds a potential remedy in unconditional trust in God: "That we must rely on God himself, and our whole dependance must be upon him" (467). Suffering, however, can produce certain advantages or results. One potential benefit is the increased knowledge of the self along with a more thorough familiarity with the respective social environment. The aforementioned educational experience compels the captive to re-evaluate his or her life as well. The torment also continues on the psychological level even after return, as demonstrated by the sleepless nights endured by Mrs. Rowlandson during which she tried to provide a meaning to her tribulations. "I remember in the night season, how the other day I was in the midst of thousands of enemies, and nothing but death before me. It is then hard work to persuade my self, that ever I should be satisfied with bread again" (466).

The story of Regina Leininger, known as the German captive, highlights the character building capability of the ordeal: “The miserable mode of living was a good assistant and means of restraint to curb the sinful flesh and its growing desires and the Word of God implanted in her tender youth could so much the more readily promote the growth of the inner life” (Heard 33).

Physical or psychological ordeal can imply the promise of salvation. The covenant of grace is reinforced by the fact that despite all religious or parochial omission or derelictions of duty, the protagonist is not deprived of the chance for salvation. Moreover, the personal connection maintained with the Lord during captivity alludes to the notion of chosenness, as Mary Rowlandson invokes the biblical explanation. “For whom the Lord loveth, he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth” (Heb.12.6) (467).

The American hero is of course a member of an elect nation driven by messianic activism. The very structure of Puritan ideology consists of three levels, the top or mythological level is the highly exalted concept of the chosen nation composed of chosen people driven by a messianic commitment to deliver redemption in the form of Anglo-American democracy and Christian values for the deserving few. The American hero is also connected to the notion of Civil (civic) Religion, as apart from Robert Bellah, the “founding father” of that school of thought Will Herberg asserts that “national life is apotheosized, national values are religionized, national heroes are divinized, national history is experienced [...] as redemptive history” (Virágos *Myth and Social Consciousness* 183). The role of the Indian captive as a defender of Puritan faith is further accentuated by David Austin (1760-1831)’s description of the American hero in his work titled: “The Downfall of Mystical Babylon; or Key to the Providence of God in the Political Operations of 1793-94:” “Behold then, this hero of America, wielding the standard of religious and civil liberty over these United States! Follow him, in his strides, across the Atlantic!” (Virágos “American” 124) The standards of religious and civil liberty are paralleled with the triumphant propagation of Christianity and the Anglo-Saxon democracy. This statement offers an expression of the apocalyptic perspective including two main features: the messianic sense of mission and the “not readily discernible” interpretation of suffering and ordeal as a prerequisite for a victory promised by God (Virágos “American” 125–26)

The Indian captivity narrative also commemorates the process during which the captive is removed from a hierarchical society and is integrated into a communal social organization. The respective texts not only utilize an opportunity to promote the values of American democracy, but certain captivity narratives resort to the very paraphernalia of the latter as Charles Johnston commemorated his experiences on the pages of the records of Virginia's Constitutional Convention discarded in the forest. The relatively democratic structure of Narragansett society is implied by Mrs. Rowlandson's easy access to King Phillip.

The egalitarian impulse of captivity narratives is also expressed in the political and economic cooptation of the captive as (s)he can play a major role in the life of the captor tribe demonstrated by Mary Rowlandson sewing clothes for Indian children or Rachel Plummer previously socialized to the private sphere of the frontier community developing a reluctant sympathy and appreciation of the status of women within Comanche society: "No woman is admitted into any of their Councils; nor is she allowed to enquire what their councils have been. When they move, the women do not know where they are going. They are no more than servants, and looked upon and treated as such" (355). Indicating a stronger public presence of women in the Northeastern Cultural Area Isaac Jogues is mutilated by an Algonquin woman converted to Christianity. Moreover, James E. Seaver, the biographer of Mary Jemison highlights the value of autobiography in promoting the principles of democracy: "At the same time it is fondly hoped that the lessons of distress that are portrayed, may have a direct tendency to increase our love of liberty; to enlarge our views of the blessings that are derived from our liberal institutions" (52). The liberal institutions Seaver refers to include the importance of political participation, or the mainstays of indirect democracy. One notable implication of the increasing political role of women is Mary Rowlandson's contribution to the negotiations concerning her ransom and eventual release.

The frontier as the topographical background of captivity narratives provided a testing ground for the personality traits of the captive, reflected in Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis: "that coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients [...] that restless, nervous energy, that dominant individualism [...] the American energy will continually demand a wider field for its exercise." According to Richard VanDerBeets the heroines of captivity narratives had to develop features

and traits considered the cornerstones of the American value system including resourcefulness, self-reliance, independence and mental and physical strength, along with resilience (xiii). Consequently, Mary Rowlandson mapped the northwestern territory of New England and Rachel Plummer explored the Southwest. The resourcefulness of the Indian captive is demonstrated among others by Isaac Jogues creating an altar in the wilderness, Robert Eastburn continuing to work as a blacksmith, or Rachel Plummer deceiving and physically defeating her captor.

Captivity narratives assign a high esteem to another crucial component of the American value system, liberty as well. According to Daniel Williams narratives of confinement performed important cultural work in the early Republic, reinforcing the dichotomy between slavery and liberty and demonstrating how people functioned when deprived of individual freedom. Mary Jemison's statement while summing up her life tends to substantiate Williams' theory: "I am sensible, however, that no one can pass from a state of freedom to that of slavery, and in the last situation rest perfectly contented" (158).

The captivity narrative also commemorates the mobility of the respective victim, thereby reinforcing another key ingredient of the American value system along with a perspective emphasizing an activist outlook. Mobility or locomotion, although of a forced nature is paired with enhanced spatial perception. The mobility of the captive also performs a culture and character building function and the description of the social life or political activities of the given captor tribe often provides a comparison with the democratic system of the home community.

The removal of the captive into the American wilderness and the resulting first encounter with nature helps to cast the hero in light of the American Adam. Following R. W. B. Lewis it is the captivity that leads to the very loss of innocence, or in a typological context the confinement in the hands of Native Americans is seen as a punishment for venturing beyond the hedge, that is the figurative Garden of Eden. At the same Roy Harvey Pearce's application of the Paradox of the Fortunate Fall concept holding that "Man's suffering was found to be good because it gave him the wisdom to comprehend his own bitter situation in his world" (104) reverberates in Mary Rowlandson's invocation of David: "It is good for me that I have been afflicted" (467). Furthermore, the captive's contact with nature, especially Rachel Plummer finding "healing balm for her wounded soul" in an underground cave (351) is reminiscent of the early



hunter narratives, as demonstrated by Daniel Boone's Narrative, and his adoration of nature:

“One day I undertook a tour through the country, and the diversity and beauties of nature... expelled every gloomy and vexatious thought. [...] I had gained the summit of a commanding ridge, and looking round with astonishing delight, beheld the ample plains, the beauteous tracts below” (Filson <http://www.earlyamerica.com/lives/boone/> accessed on 2010 October 1).

The American West as primarily the scene of the captivity experience provided adventure and a testing ground for the American hero. This is well illustrated by Theodore Roosevelt's ethnocentric insistence of the purification of the West from the Indians in order to make room for the expanding Anglo-Saxon race. In *The Winning of the West* (1894) he advances the time-worn Social Darwinist argument:

“The most ultimately righteous of all wars is war with savages, though it is apt to be also the most terrible and the most inhuman. The rude fierce settler who drives the savage from the land lays all civilized mankind under his debt. Americans and Indians, Boer and Zulu, Cossack and Tartar, New Zealander and Maori— in each case the victor, horrible though many of his deeds are, has laid deep the foundations for future greatness of a mighty people” (Winning III 45-46 qtd in Virágos *Myth and Social Consciousness* 172) ).

### [3] Final observations

The protagonist of the captivity narrative commemorating the darker and temporary defeat ridden side of these “ultimately righteous” aspirations can be appreciated in light of other substantial achievements of American literary criticism. Daniel Hoffmann, in *Form and Fable in American Fiction* (1961) presents a criteria system for the American hero. Accordingly, and reinforcing Northrop Frye's argument as well, the main feature of these experiences is the quest, the search for and the exploration of one's self and identity. This quest at the same time entails self-definition as the settlers being removed from the safety of their homes have undergone a similar experience to that of slaves kidnapped into Heideggerian nothingness. As Hoffmann argues the American hero has no past, parents, or home. Being deprived of the past implies America as a new beginning, the lack of home refers to the fact that the American

hero broke away from the European past and the respective adventures cannot be considered the continuation of the European experience. The captive settler driven by a search for national identity and freed from the shackles of European culture belongs to an array of such well-known stock figures of the pantheon of American heroes as the *frontiersman* and the *Yankee*. Slotkin also points to hunters, outlaws, and of course the Indian captive as the true founding fathers or mothers of the nation. The self exploration or discovery indicates individualism which is further accentuated by the lack of siblings or parents. The dearth of the past also implies a sense of exile or the fact that European culture was not reproduced overseas.

Furthermore, one can apply Leslie Fiedler's "Archetype and Signature" concept, in which archetype refers to the timeless patterns given to the most frequent aspects of human life, thus it is the space of the unconscious, the primordial self while the signature entails the aggregate or individuating factors in the given text. The captivity experience itself is the archetypal situation, while its commemoration either in an oral or written form is the signature. (Leitch 126-127). The Indian capture entails an encounter with the devilish Other hidden in the deep innermost fears of the victim. As Fiedler argued whatever society represses it resurfaces in its literature, thus despite the total exclusion of the Native American from mainstream discourse, he returned and in the life of the authors of captivity narratives appeared in immediate proximity. The fear of the Other or the wilderness materialized and gained a certain reinforcement by the captivity experience. The American Adam irretrievably lost his innocence as the threat of Indian captivity personified by Hawthorne's "devilish Indian behind every tree" (525) became a mainstay in the collective unconscious at the North American frontier.

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