

The Indian Captivity Narrative as a Prototype of Early American Fiction

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I

The purpose of my essay is to examine the role of the Indian captivity narrative as a forerunner or prototype of early American fiction. Accordingly, I attempt to reveal how the scene, protagonist, and theme of captivity narratives, that is the frontier, the main character offering an action pattern of the American hero, and the influence of sentimental and Gothic literature respectively are reflected in selected works.

Critics tend to agree that the modern novel in Europe begins with Cervantes's *Don Quixot* (1605, 1616). Anthony J. Close asserts that Cervantes' masterpiece was one of the foundations of the modern novel born in England in the first half of the 18th century (237). The satirical view of the chivalric tradition and a bittersweet rendering of a clash between illusion and reality inspired Henry Fielding to write the *History of Joseph Andrews* (1742), considered the cornerstone of the English comic novel (235). At the same time one cannot neglect Cervantes' impact on German literature manifested in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* published in 1794 (237). In Ian Watt's "The Rise of the Novel" (1957) the author places the beginnings of the American novel in the early eighteenth century. Furthermore, Richard Chase assigns the following functions to the American novel: "present the facsimiles of the peculiarities of the country, and consist in strong graphic delineations of its bold and beautiful scenery, and of its men and manners as they really exist (qtd. in Baym 225, 244). The Indian captivity narrative, which is among the first frontier writings from the seventeenth century describing the experiences of white settlers of North America taken by Native Americans, depicts exactly this environment, these people, and in figurative sense the American hero.

My research effort utilizes the following theoretical apparatus: the frontier is discussed according to Frederick Jackson Turner and Richard Slotkin's views; the exploration of the American hero and his or her journey is based on the model developed by Daniel Hoffman; the captive as a mythological construct is examined according to the theories of John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett; and Joseph Campbell's hero cycle will help in highlighting the general theme. Moreover, my primary sources include the accounts of female protagonists, Mary Rowlandson *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God* (1682), Mary Kinnan "A True Narrative of the

Sufferings of Mary Kinnan” (1795), Rachel Plummer “A Narrative of the Capture and Subsequent Sufferings of Mrs. Rachel Plummer” (1838), and Cotton Mather’s rendering of the adventures of Hannah Dustan (A Narrative of Hannah Dustan’s Notable Delivery from Captivity in Mather’s *Decennium Luctuosum*, 1699). My choice of only these narratives is due to temporal and spatial restrictions and by doing so I will cover three different time periods, from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century.

II

I emphasize the following shared features of the genre: description of physical confinement in the hands of Native Americans at the American frontier, sentimental elements aimed at obtaining the reader’s sympathy, Gothic and fantastic components, and promotion of a national ideology.

Captivity narratives have a central place in early American literary history. They were the first reports of the New World experience commemorating the ordeals of the settlers in simple direct prose. The early American readers were very much interested in these confinement stories offering a description of the westward expansion and justifying the mistreatment of Native Americans.

The captivity narrative is among the first texts describing the Puritan settlers’ reaction to the wilderness around them. The other genres included autobiographical narratives of exploration, such as that of Cabeza de Vaca (1528), and spiritual narratives, among them the *Journal* of John Winthrop (1630-1649). The accounts discussed in my study later served as sources of information for other authors including Nathaniel Hawthorne in case of reworking the Hannah Dustan myth, or James F. Cooper.

The significance of the narratives changed during time, in the mid-eighteenth century captivity narratives became a vehicle for anti-Indian and anti-French propaganda. As demonstrated by Mary Kinnan’s account fictional elements such as torture, death, and horror had become the key points of the stories. At the end of the eighteenth century American readers started to lose interest in captivity narratives, and the genre experienced a decline. In the nineteenth century although new frontiers brought new stories, the pattern remained the same, only scholars kept studying the frontier, the frontiersmen, in one word the American culture through these accounts.

I place the early American novel between 1791, the year when Susanna Rowson’s *Charlotte Temple* was published and 1841, the appearance of Cooper’s *Deerslayer*. These texts commemorate the actual founding of the American nation as the authors inform us about the experiences of the new settlers, the growing

pains of the new republic, the importance of participatory democracy, and the encroachment on Indian land. Another important feature is the quest for identity that can be interpreted both on the individual and national level.

I have identified shared features of early American fiction produced by Susanna Rowson, Charles Brockden Brown, Lydia Maria Child, Washington Irving and of course Cooper such as physical or literal captivity at the frontier, sentimental appeals to the reader, and the integration of Gothic and fantastic motives.

Susanna Rowson's (1762-1824) *Charlotte Temple* (1791) became the first American best-selling novel. It is the story of a 15 years old British schoolgirl who meets with a British soldier on his way to fight against the American revolutionaries. While travelling to New York he seduces the girl. Charlotte soon finds herself abandoned and pregnant, in a state of poverty and deteriorating health conditions. After giving birth to her baby girl she dies, and when the soldier finds it out he suffers from remorse for the rest of his life. The novel reflects the traditional theme of sentimental fiction, as a careless rake violates a young aristocratic woman's honor. Moreover, it is an allegory of the changing and newly born America that wants to find its new distinguished identity separated from England while it provides "a rhetorical association of women—particularly of captive women—with national power." (Burnham 85).

Charles Brockden Brown's (1771-1810) best-known work *Wieland* (1798) is regarded as the first gothic novel written by an American, in which he combines gothic and sentimental novel elements. *Wieland* is one of the four novels (the others being *Ormond*, *Arthur Mervyn*, *Edgar Huntly*) written between 1798-1800. However, instead of "haunted castles, abbeys, monasteries, and time-yellowed manuscripts commonly associated with British and Continental gothic novels," (Kundu) he explores the "diseases and affections of the human frame on American soil" (Kundu). As Pamela J. Sheldon argues Brockden Brown locates the source of fear and horror not in the ghosts of an abandoned castle, but in the protagonist's haunted soul. In *Edgar Huntly, or, Memoirs of a Sleepwalker* (1799) he describes the terror and suffering that was already familiar to the readers of the captivity narratives. Edgar, the young man who wants to find out who killed his friend, during his quest kills three Indians, and he is not sorry for them.

By many literary historians Washington Irving is considered to be the first American Man of Letters and the first modern short story writer. "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" (1819-1820) are among the best known tales in America. He was among the first writers, together with Cooper, who was internationally known and acknowledged. A parallel can be discovered between the supernatural experiences of Irving's protagonist and Rachel Plummer described later in this essay.

Lydia Maria Child (1802-1880) was an American novelist, also widely known for being an abolitionist and women's rights activist and Indian rights advocate. She started her literary career writing *Hobomok: A Tale of Early Times*. This sentimental novel was published in 1824 and was set in Massachusetts in the early colonial period around the 1620's. Contrary to the captivity narratives, here a Native American becomes the hero. Hobomok, depicted as a noble savage sacrificing his happiness, and going into the wilderness to die, foreshadows the future of his whole race.

James Fenimore Cooper (1789-1851) considered the father of the American novel was a staunch promoter of the image of the Indian as the Noble Savage. The concept of the Noble Savage was introduced by Cadwallader Colden in his "*History of the Five Indian Nations*." He believed in the brightness and nobility of the Indians and especially noted their patriotic attitude matching that of the Roman heroes, "The Greeks and Romans, once as much Barbarians as our Indians now are, deified the Hero's that first taught to them the Vertues, from whence the Grandeur of those Renowned Nations wholly proceeded" (406).

The "*Leatherstocking Tales*" with its plot taking place at the Frontier brought the American "frontier hero" into existence. Natty Bumppo, was an ideal frontiersman, a loner living in the wilderness with his best friend, an Indian called Chingachgook. He combined in himself the best of the civilization and the savage man; he was brave and moral, just as a real American hero should be. Sometimes he acted as a mediator or interpreter between the two races, the two opposite worlds, and other times he helped to defeat the Indians primarily due to his familiarity with Native American customs and way of life.

The main motifs of the five novels of the *Leatherstocking Tales*, *Deerslayer* (1841), *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), *Pathfinder* (1840), *Pioneers* (1823), *Prairie* (1827), forward an original American theme replete with wilderness, adventure, conflict with unfamiliar natural environment for the settlers, clash of indigenous inhabitants and white invaders, and a frontier hero.

The captivity narrative gives a wide insight on the frontier experience and as part of the literature of the frontier it led to the creation of a national myth that helped in the evolution of the American identity. The captivity narrative also implies one of the myths of the origination of American culture as it includes both the settler and the archetypal enemy, and expresses such ideas as being chosen, mission, and western progress.

As Richard Slotkin argued in the Frontier Myth: many American myths may be seen as versions of this original myth: the myth of the captive. Frederick Jackson Turner introduced the importance of the frontier experience in interpreting the development of the US, the American spirit of independence, and individualism.

A crucial component of his Frontier Thesis: the regression into “primitive conditions” is illustrated by the captivity of another woman, Hanna Dustan, who became “Indianized” and scalped her captors before escaping from the Indians.

The captivity narrative is a rich source of information about the landscape of the New World, Indian culture, and the settlement period. Furthermore, it addresses race relations and gender roles in the WASP(M) dominated nation, and attempts to refute contemporary stereotypes. It changed the conventional image of the wilderness, as not only the Native Americans were able to survive there, but captive women too.

In early American fiction the description of the frontier also gains importance. The adoration or enraptured state of mind upon encountering nature in a pristine state appears in several works. In *Hobomok* a frontier romance (Bergland) expressing the tension between heathen and Christian, social and savage, elegance and strength, fierceness and timidity, the protagonist encounters the loneliness and solitude of nature: “Every eye bent forward, and no sound broke in upon the stillness, excepting now and then, the low, dismal growl of the wolf was heard in the distance” (Chapter XII). Rip Van Winkle “saw at a distance the lordly Hudson [...] moving on its silent, but majestic course [...] and at last losing itself in the blue highlands” (356). In *Deerslayer* Cooper exults as: “The words are said to the ears of the Almighty. The air is His breath, and the light of the sun is little more than a glance of His eye” (316).

The Indian captive presents a prototype of the American hero corresponding to Daniel Hoffman’s model put forth in *Form and Fable in American Fiction* (1961).

The American folk hero is startlingly different from most of the great heroes of myths [...] the American has no parents. He has no past, no patrimony, no siblings, no family, and no life cycle, because he never marries or has children. He seldom dies. If death does overtake him, it proves to be merely a stage in his transformation to still another identity. (Hoffman 78)

The hero of the captivity narrative, just like Hoffman’s hero, finds herself in the wilderness, but instead of being lost, she is strengthened by this experience and starts to rebuild her destroyed identity. Not only she is reborn and metamorphosed into a stronger person, but the captivity experience launches her on a quest for self-knowledge. Furthermore, the respective ordeals express the idea of new beginning, while the protagonist becomes a symbolic carrier of the main values of American culture: democracy, individualism, liberty, and equality. The heroes of the captivity narratives, victims of Native American cruelty, mostly women, crossed unwillingly the line between civilization and savagery. The object of the Puritans’ heroic quest

was salvation. Consequently, Mary Rowlandson, Rachel Plummer, and Mary Kinnan functioned as female versions of the American hero. Rowlandson brought her Christianity into the wilderness when she was captured, and she lived this experience as if she were in Hell. However, she managed to protect her values even if her life and spirit were in danger.

Another potential interpretation of the protagonists is offered by the concept of the monomyth, the idea developed by Joseph Campbell. In the book of John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett called *The American Superhero* (1977), a new element is added to this scheme: a heroic redemption is integrated into the hero's journey. Nevertheless, one must realize that the captive is not a superhero; the captive's task is to restore the idyllic conditions at her community by facing the enemy and accomplishing a redemptive task. The captive believed that because her Christian commitment strengthened among the heathens God preserved her for a reason and that was to get back to her community and set an example.

My last point of inquiry is the theme of these texts and I will highlight the hero's journey in addition to the sentimental, gothic, and fantastic elements. Joseph Campbell's "monomyth" explains in detail that in all mythic stories of different cultures there is an ancient universal pattern beyond its narrative elements. He described the different stages of the hero's journey, which pattern can be followed in the captivity narrative. The three stages are: departure/separation when the captive as the female hero embarks upon her journey taken by force from her safely thought home by the Indians. Initiation is penetration into the wilderness, into Native American culture. The return stage starts when the captive returns to her original community (or she decides not to), yet she is transformed physically and psychologically. She tells her story by writing the captivity narrative to set an example. This pattern can be partially discovered in the cave episode of the Rachel Plummer narrative, or in case of Rip Van Winkle. Although Rip goes in the wilderness on his own, he experiences major physical and psychological changes upon his return.

Similarly to the captivity narrative early American fiction contains sentimental elements, one such example is *Charlotte Temple*. In both cases, the detailed description of the protagonists' ordeal helps the reader to submerge in the "language of tears and luxury of sorrow" (Tompkins 132). The standard figure of sentimental novels, the rake or villain, is played by the Indian. Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland* is a treasure trove of the gothic and the fantastic. The text reveals both internal and external fear. A parallel can be seen with the hellish scene described by Rowlandson and *Wieland*'s fatal vision eventually leading to the murder of his family.

III

All in all, the location, protagonist, and theme of captivity narratives reappeared in early American fiction as the selected examples show and the following parallels can be established. The original captivity motive of Rowlandson is reversed in *Hobomok*. The sentimental tone of the Kinnan narrative is replayed in *Charlotte Temple*. Rowlandson's inner fears are paralleled with Wieland's demons. The frontier as a staple scene for both genres is illustrated in the Plummer narrative's description of nature and that of *Deerslayer*. Fantastic elements and the hero cycle appear in the Plummer narrative's cave episode and in "Rip van Winkle." Hanna Dustan scalping her captors reflects Indianization along with Edgar Huntly's drinking the blood of the slain enemy: "I approached the torrent and not only drank copiously, but laved my head, neck, and arms in the delicious element" (223).

In my paper I attempted to substantiate the hypothesis of the captivity narrative being the prototype and forerunner of the early American fiction. I identified three factors supporting my claim.

The first factor is that the plot reflects an original American theme implying the Puritans' adventures in the New World, foreshadowing the ideology of Manifest Destiny as the driving force behind the westward expansion. As a second factor I examined the frontier as the scene of action. Captivity narratives give a wide insight on the frontier experience enabling readers to obtain information about the landscape, the Indian culture, race relations, gender roles, and contemporary stereotypes. The recording and subsequent readership of captivity experiences changed the conventional image of the wilderness too, as not only were the Indians able to live there, but captive women as well. The third factor shows that the captive finding herself in the wilderness rebuilt her identity and her resilience enables her to fit into the mythical dimensions of the American hero. Since Indian captivity narratives incorporated all the three assumptions above, that is: original American theme, the reported experiences take place at the frontier, and the new version of the American hero is born constructing a national myth I can conclude that the given texts can be considered a prototype of early American fiction.

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