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How significant is ambiguity as both a theme and a writerly strategy in American literature?

It could be argued that America was as much discovered as it was invented; the reality of an enormous expanse of unknown territory being progressively settled and tamed was linked to the need to make sense of it, to shape it. What was America? What should it be? What did it *mean*? Because of its vastness and the diversity of the immigrants who settled it, would it ever be possible to have one America, one meaning of America? It had to be explored, but it also had to be deciphered. There was therefore an intrinsic ambiguity in the idea of America, and it was bound to have an influence on American literature. The Puritan concept of the importance of the Word and of the Symbol did also shape that nascent literature, so that the land had to be read, in the light of the Bible, but also written, through Laws, Declarations, and Constitutions. There was a need for a New Language for this New World; as Emerson argues[1], 'the Poet is the sayer, the namer, and represents beauty': the writer reveals the Word – and the World - to the reader. Ambiguities in the concept of America must thus be projected into ambiguities in the form of American literature. To analyse this proposition and assess its significance, this essay will consider several different literary works across the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries: Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener*, Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* and Hammett's *Red Harvest*. For each one of these, the focus will be on the conceptual or thematic ambiguities as well as the formal (linguistic or stylistic) ambiguities.

[1] 'The Poet', *Norton Anthology*, pp. 1177-1191.

The Scarlet Letter, published in 1850, is set in the Puritan New England of the 1640s, and one of its main themes is the conflict between individualism, as shown by Hester Prynne and her daughter Pearl, and the strict constraints of the community. Similarly, Hawthorne's style is based on the Puritan tradition of the Symbol, which is by definition ambiguous. Moreover, Hawthorne is also influenced by Transcendentalism, although he does not share its optimism; according to A.Lombardo[2], his language is an attempt to decipher the secret meaning of reality, to reveal the sense of life, as advocated by Emerson, Thoreau or Whitman, but unlike them, he is convinced that this communion between the World and the Word is too frequently tainted by the idea of sin and the hidden Evil, and strengthens the mystery and ambiguity of the universe. Ambiguity, therefore, is omnipresent is *The Scarlet Letter*. There is no definitive point of view, even from the narrator himself, who eschews making judgement by resorting to conditional sentences: the wild rose-bush 'may' symbolise a 'sweet moral blossom', Hester 'might' be, alternatively, an adulteress or a Madonna, a victim or a culprit, and Arthur Dimmesdale 'might' have had on his chest a scarlet letter of his own. That letter itself is the most ambiguous symbol, since we are never told what exactly it stands for: 'Adulteress', 'Apostate', 'Able'[3] , 'Arthur' or 'America'? If that single letter can have so many meanings, how are we to make sense of the world around us and how can we judge what is right or wrong? S. Manning[4] argues that for the artist in the first half of the nineteenth century, there was a choice between 'the materialist world of progress' and 'the disembodied symbolizing of the Transcendentalists', and that Hawthorne could not

[2] *Sphere History of Literature*, 'Nathaniel Hawthorne', p.173.
[3] *The Scarlet Letter*, p.161.
[4] 'Nathaniel Hawthorne, the Artist of Puritanism', *New Pelican Guide to English Literature*, pp.97-110.

agree with either. Light and darkness, gloom and freedom, are therefore constantly interwoven in the novel: for instance, in chapter XVI, 'A Forest Walk', where a 'gleam of flickering sunshine' plays under 'a gray expanse of cloud'. The forest is supposed to be a place of evil, where witches and the 'Black Man' roam, but it is also a place of freedom, where Hester is at last allowed to literally 'let her hair down', and to temporarily escape the laws of the community. As the narrator says in the conclusion, 'the reader may choose among these theories'[5] – if he can. Hawthorne uses ambiguity to make us question our ability to make moral judgements, and to remind us that the human heart cannot be reduced to prejudices or all-encompassing laws. As Manning[6] points out: '*The Scarlet Letter* is not a search for truth: several modes of perception and several "explanations" remain possible to the end.'

With *Bartleby the Scrivener, A Story of Wall-Street*, Hermann Melville seems to challenge the reader: understanding the story and its eponymous central character is as difficult to us as it is to its narrator, who prides himself on the safety and soundness of his reasoning. Inhabitant of a clockwork world where everyone, including himself, operates like an automaton, this narrator is a creature of predictable habits, where the uncertainties and passions of life are nicely eclipsed by a wall, and he is confident in his ability to read, to decipher, anything or anyone, as easily as he can sum up his own life and his assistants, 'Turkey', 'Nippers' and 'Ginger Nut'. He looks for a reasonable, precise and dispassionate life couched in softly spoken euphemisms. The irruption of Bartleby in his universe has the effect of a grain of sand in a machine: Bartleby does not make sense, he

[5] *The Scarlet Letter*, p.259.
[6] *New Pelican Guide to English Literature*, p.110.

cannot and will not be understood, and he opposes to any attempt of analysis his quiet and ambiguous assertion: "I would prefer not to". Bartleby, in the spiritual as well as the physical sense, is ungraspable: he cannot be forced to do anything, nor can he be kicked out of the office, as 'Nippers' advocates[7], and he cannot be forced to explain himself. As the story progresses towards an expected denouement that never materialises, Bartleby becomes more and more of a ghost, more and more elusive. His ambiguous language infects his co-workers and the narrator himself[8]. Attempts to define him are always somewhat unsatisfactory, like Ginger Nut's judgement: "I think, sir, he's a little *luny*."[9] To the bitter end, his unbearable unfathomableness resists any neat interpretation: is he a 'dead letter', sent to the flames without having been read? What makes Bartleby as a character interesting is his ambiguity, and the story could be seen as a parable on the relationship between the writer and the reader. As much as a copyist is a very poor sort of writer, anybody who is satisfied with one definitive interpretation of a text is a very poor sort of reader; such seems to be one of the messages of *Bartleby*. The elusiveness of the world is what constitutes its beauty, and it should not be obstructed by material or spiritual walls. Harold Beaver[10] explains that a 'multiple text' revealing the complexity of reality must be associated to a 'multiple reading' that will respond to it. Melville's works are designed as puzzles that mirror the 'World as a Riddle', and it is not surprising, although it is unfortunate, that it took so long for his books to be properly understood, and for him to be recognised as a major author.

[7] *Norton Anthology*, 'Bartleby the Scrivener', p.2337.
[8] *Norton Anthology*, pp. 2343-2344.
[9] *Norton Anthology*, p.2337.
[10] In 'Herman Melville: in the wake of the White Whale', *New Pelican Guide*, pp.127-138.

Pudd'nhead Wilson is a serious farce with a mix of grotesque and tragedy, a comedy with gloom undertones. Mark Twain is often portrayed as the writer of the 'Western' or 'frontier' humour, with its habit of hyperbole and its peculiar dialect[11]. Humour is a double-edged weapon, and a caricature also underlines important aspects of its subject. Laughter is one of the most sophisticated ability of the human race: to make us laugh is therefore to make us think. Humour can also be used as a demonstration *ad absurdum*, to prove the meaninglessness of a concept, such as race in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*. More exactly, ambiguity is used here to question differences. Wilson's half-dogs, Tom Driscoll and Chambers and the Italian Siamese twins are at the same time different but either inseparable or indistinguishable. The ambiguity lies in their simultaneous duality and unity. In this topsy-turvy universe, opposites mirror each other until they blend into each other: 'Pudd'nhead' is actually the smartest man in town; the master is actually the slave (and vice-versa); and Judge Driscoll is not a man of reason, but of honour and passion, and of very limited judgement! The problem of unity and diversity was especially relevant in the aftermath of the Civil War, where North and South, blacks and whites, had to accept their differences but also their equality within one single nation. This was an emotional subject for a southern writer like Twain. Significantly, *Pudd'nhead Wilson* is set in the pre-war Old South. Twain's own position was ambiguous: he had for the South a mix of nostalgia and disgust; it was, after all, the rural background of his happy childhood, opposed to the materialistic new era he had ridiculed in *The Gilded Age*, but it was also the backward South of slavery[12]. Although he caricatures the citizens of this little Southern town, one can feel also some affection for

[11] See 'American Humour and the Rise of the West', *The Literature of the United States*, pp. 187-213.
[12] See 'Mark Twain's Gods and Tormentors: the Treasure, the River, the Nigger and the Twin Brother' by B.Poli, *Sphere History of Literature*, ch.12.

their rugged individualism, their quaint code of honour and their delusion of grandeur. Despite their shortcomings, Twain manages to show some goodness in them. Ambivalence, more than ambiguity, is an essential theme and device for him, as is underlined by the recurrence of twins in his works, and the reconciliation of extremes that he depicted mirrored the Reconstruction period of America.

The Great War shattered many certainties, be they moral, social or philosophical. It destroyed empires, nations and peoples but also concepts, such as confidence in progress and technology as essentially good, or trust in traditions and institutions. Now was the time of the 'Jazz Age' and the 'lost generation', who had survived the war, lost its bearings and intended to live life to the full[13]. *The Sun Also Rises* is particularly representative of this age, and Hemingway had first-hand experience of his subject, as he was himself a member of the expatriate community. In this novel, one of the main themes is gender ambiguity: masculine and feminine roles have been shattered by the war, and each character tries to adjust to the new reality – with varying degrees of success. Relationships between men and women, indeed love itself, are in the process of being redefined. The old school, incarnated to a large extent by Robert Cohn and his honest – and stubborn – belief in faithfulness, loyalty and commitment, is not compatible with the new reality anymore: as Brett says to Jake: 'Don't be cross with Robert, he's still only a child, you know'[14]. Each of the two main protagonists, Jake Barnes and Brett Ashley, is faced with a dilemma that is linked to the very definition of a man and a woman in this new world, which is like a fiesta, a modern carnival where ancient roles do not apply.

[13] See 'Modernist and Post-Modernist Modes: Fiction and Poetry'.
[14] *The Sun Also Rises*, p.18.

Both have been mutilated by the war[15]: Jake's physical castration is mirrored by Brett's loss of her true love. Both are repelled by two opposite poles of their own sex: for Jake, it is at one end the effeminate men of the *bal musette*[16], at the other the manly perfection of Pedro Romero; for Brett, it is the Madonna, being idolised by Cohn or the dancers[17], or the whore, like Georgette[18], 'one of those bitches'[19]. Torn between what they cannot be anymore and what they loathe to be, their unstable position is necessarily ambiguous, until they reach a compromise. Hemingway's style, voluntarily minimalist, underlines this ambiguity: emotions are the hidden part of the 'iceberg'[20], a 'nothing that is' that the protagonists seek vainly to repress and that the reader must reveal. These anti-heroes are too 'blind' to find out the solution or too 'tight', too constrained by the traditional patterns that society wants to project on them. The balanced, sober prose injects some order into the meaningless chaos of the dialogues, reveals the rhythm in them, the elaborate choreography in the middle of the confusion. The image of the policeman raising his baton[21] at the end evokes a conductor directing an orchestra, as if everything had just been a cacophonic preamble to a symphony, a tuning of instruments, and that now, at last, harmony had been reached. Jake's final remark, however, underlines the intrinsic ambiguity of his relationship with Brett: an accord, possibly, but not a communion.

[15] See also A.Massa, 'Ernest Hemingway', *American Literature in Context IV*, ch.12.
[16] *The Sun Also Rises*, p.17.
[17] *The Sun Also Rises*, p.135.
[18] *The Sun Also Rises*, ch.3.
[19] *The Sun Also Rises*, p.213.
[20] See A.Massa, 'Ernest Hemingway', *American Literature in Context IV*, p.168.
[21] *The Sun Also Rises*, p.216.

Red Harvest was published in 1929, the year of the Great Depression, at the end of a decade of excesses: greed was good, and corruption rampant. Quick-witted entrepreneurs like Al 'Scarface' Capone knew a business opportunity when they saw one, and the Volstead Act was to them a godsend[22]. The American Dream had turned into a nightmare, and thus 'Personville' became 'Poisonville'. The 'Continental Op' steps into this picture like a cool-minded lone ranger, but his emotional detachment from his surroundings makes him morally ambiguous. He is nobody, yet he could be anybody. Personville itself could be any town, although its mining background locates it somewhere near the Rockies. He pursues his self-appointed mission with the grim determination of surgeon intent on ridding his patient of a cancerous tumour; indeed, the style mixes clinical precision and morbid metaphors. The town needs 'fixed', and a bit of 'sewing up' or 'stitching up'. Violence and death are sterilised through euphemisms, such as 'gone to sit on the right hand of God', 'both sides bled aplenty', or a machine-gun 'settling down to business'[23]. Murder seems as casual to the 'Op' as it is to his opponents, since the uninvolved 'I' does not reveal his state-of-mind to the reader. The moral ambiguity is indeed so complete that it is entirely plausible that the 'Op' may have killed Dinah Brand. As new levels of complexity are added to the initial story, the reader is constantly wrong-footed and loses sight of the truth, if there is any to be found. It seems that all the pieces fall back together by luck at the end, with 'Poisonville' barely 'saved' and turned into 'a sweet-smelling thornless bed of roses'[24]. Only once is it possible to get an insight of the thoughts of the 'Op': his two dreams are two ambiguous windows into

[22] See also H.Brogan, *Pelican History of the U.S.A*, ch.21, 'Irresponsibility'.
[23] *Red Harvest*, p.122.
[24] *Red Harvest*, p.216.

his head[25]. In both, he tries to catch a mysterious figure, either a woman with a veil, or a man with a sombrero; the first dream is optimistic, with a happy ending after his run through the streets of America, the second one is pessimistic, a nightmare, a symbolic fall, which seems to echo the original Fall (Sunday morning, church bells). It could possibly be an evocation of the quest for an American fallen victim to her greed. The moral puzzle is presented to the reader as a challenge, a question: like the reports, the book 'didn't fool the Old Man'[26], who, as an external observer could stand for the reader, or for God, condemning the Fallen to 'merry hell'.

In each one of these five examples, ambiguity is used for slightly different purposes. Hawthorne, by demonstrating the multiplicity of meanings attached to a symbol, questions the possibility of a definitive interpretation of the human heart, between the Puritan gloom and the Transcendentalist optimism. Melville seems to ask us to ponder the need for elusiveness in the literary work, and by extension in the world itself, in the materialist 'Gilded Age'. Twain wants to attract our attention to the absurdity of race and the need for reconciliation between North and South after the Civil War. Hemingway underlines the need to redefine masculine and feminine roles in the post-war world. Hammett presents the reader with a moral challenge in relationship with pre-Depression America. However, each one of them, in his own period, asks the reader to think about what America is, what it should be, what it means. In the quest for an American identity, ambiguity is crucial: it is framing the question, the problem to be solved. American literature is as much about 'writing America' as it is about 'reading

[25] *Red Harvest*, ch.21.
[26] *Red Harvest*, p.216.

America': it is a process of discovering and inventing the idea of America, and ambiguity can be seen as a probe, an interrogative exchange between the writer and the reader. Out of the many possible meanings, there is one that is America: '*E Pluribus Unum*'.

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