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American Studies and the Concept of Culture: A Theory and Method

AMERICAN STUDIES IS YOUNG, AND THUS, INEVITABLY, HAS BEEN UNSURE OF its goals and methods. Part of its uncertainty is due to the skeptical attitudes of some scholars who identify themselves with the older, more respectable and secure disciplines. But despite the matter of prestige, the problem of theory and method is very real. As yet there is no generally recognized theory of American Studies, and thus we do not really know who we are, and what we are doing. There is even disagreement as to whether or not such a theory is desirable at this time. While a number of scholars have suggested theories and methods, others feel that the best procedure is to avoid dogmatic definition of content or method, and to wait for the discipline to define itself through practice. Henry Nash Smith writes: "Method in scholarship grows out of practice, or rather out of repeated criticism of practice intended to remedy observed shortcomings."[1]

While those who suggest that practice must come before theory deserve our respect, especially because of their outstanding practical successes, it seems doubtful to me whether anything is to be gained from the neglect of theory, provided that theoretical suggestions are treated as just that, as suggestions, and not as dogmatic attempts to circumscribe a new and developing field. Theory and definition have the value of clarification, of suggesting useful distinctions and possibly fruitful hypotheses. There comes a point when the justification of a new field must exceed a reaction against the narrow perspectives of either the New Criticism or purely quantitative social science. Nor are the suggestions that the defining characteristic of

1 "Can American Studies Develop a Method?," in *Studies in American Culture: Dominant Ideas and Images,* Joseph J. Kwiat and Mary C. Turpie, eds. (Minneapolis, 1960), p. 14. At the outset I would like to acknowledge my obligation to several who have read and criticized this paper in one or more of its various revisions, though by doing so I do not imply that they necessarily agree with my point of view. Many of the basic ideas were originally developed in a seminar taught by Dr. Brom Weber. I also wish to thank Professors Leo Marx, Arnold Rose and especially Charles Foster. Of course the final responsibility is mine.

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American Studies is "the effort to view any given subject of investigation from new perspectives," or to view it from an interdisciplinary standpoint adequate.[2] Hopefully the student of any discipline will attempt to look at his subject from new perspectives, and an increasing number of studies in both the sciences and humanities are interdisciplinary.

What then is American Studies? Briefly defined, it is the study of American culture. Culture is the key concept, the unifying concept, the root word which suggests both theory and method. It is a branch of culture studies, and as such is closer to the social sciences theoretically than to the humanities. It is a specialized branch of cultural anthropology.[3] The materials studied may be literary, but the approach will be that of the student of culture, not the critic. It is time to recognize this fact openly and to start working out its implications.

The skeptic will now ask: If American Studies is merely a culture study, then how does it differ from other culture studies? Has it any special defining characteristics? Of course the obvious unique characteristic is that it is American. It is concerned with a culture which can be defined according to certain spatio-temporal dimensions. In the long run this will be its only distinguishing characteristic, for if American Studies fulfills its promise, it is highly likely that similar investigations will be undertaken of other national cultures. It will be but a branch of culture studies of modern literate societies.

Many, perhaps most studies by anthropologists have been of nonliterate cultures. In most primitive societies culture is communicated by oral, not written means. Even in high civilizations only a small minority of the population was capable of reading or writing until after the invention of the printing press. Systems of universal free public education organized to transmit culture have been created only in modern times, made necessary by the increasing complexity of modern cultures, and especially by their dependence on specialization and literacy.

American Studies may be the unifying result of trends in both the humanities and anthropology. To the student of the humanities, culture is becoming more and more important. To the anthropologist the written and artistic expressions of modern literate societies are of increasing significance. Redfield writes:

"Regional studies" may have one development into a study not so much

2 Smith in Kwiat and Turpie, p. 3, and Richard M. Huber, "A Theory of American Studies," *Social Education,* XVIII (October 1954), 267.

3 This is recognized by William Randel when he writes that "of all established disciplines, cultural anthropology, more specifically social anthropology, is the closest to American Studies in governing purpose." In "Toward a Method in American Studies," *Quarterly Journal of the Florida Academy of Science,* XXIII (Spring 1960), 67.

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> of a region as of a culture; a single localized long-standing way of life composed of a Little Tradition of the nonliterate and illiterate and a Great Tradition of the literate and philosophic few. These two aspects of the one reality are to be found, respectively, in the community study of the anthropologist and in the study of the art and literature by the humanist. The two traditions have made each other . . . . and anthropologists are likely to join with . . . other specialists of literature and history in the complete study of these culture-civilizations.[4]

It is not unreasonable to suggest that the co-operative study Redfield foresees may be improved by creating a discipline which combines special knowledge of both culture and humanities. The student of modern literate societies requires special training in the use and interpretation of written artifacts. These include not only such things as government documents, personal diaries and other such usual historical resources, but also literature, for to the student of culture, as contrasted with the historian, it may be more useful in discovering cultural significances than merely descriptive documents.[5] Yet the understanding and proper use of documents of fiction, as of other documents of art, require knowledge, not only of content, but of craft and form. They are documents, but in a very special way. The student of modern literate culture must acquire a considerable special knowledge of the techniques of the high arts as well as of popular culture and mass communication. American Studies as a branch of modern literate culture studies requires a general theoretical orientation to culture study, and additional special knowledge of the written artifacts that are one of the defining characteristics of modern cultures.

The necessity of knowledge of literary technique is especially evident in historically oriented culture research. Unlike the anthropologist who observes the natives of an existing primitive culture, students of historical American Studies must use the surviving documents of a past era. This is one of the reasons it requires knowledge of many disciplines. It is also the reason it seems at times more like one of the humanities. Thus far most effort at inferring the psychological states of past natives of our culture has been centered on written documents. The American Studies student has often confused his concern with written kinds of evidence—especially with great American literature—with American Studies as a whole and its direction. The artifacts from which a culture is inferred include not just written documents, certainly not just literature, but also

[4] Robert Redfield, "Relations of Anthropology to the Social Sciences and to the Humanities," in A. L. Kroeber, chm., *Anthropology Today: An Encyclopedic Inventory* (Chicago, 1953), p. 737.

[5] See section below, p. 266, for a fuller consideration of the use of literature in culture studies.

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the creations of the other arts, as well as the products of technology and science. The true reason why American Studies is interdisciplinary becomes evident. It is so not just to get a new angle on a traditional subject matter, or to look on an event from several angles, but because the concept of culture around which American Studies revolves cuts across and includes the content of all the other disciplines. These disciplines are, in fact, the means our society uses to communicate a knowledge of culture, and are thus one of the best sources for an investigator of culture.

If culture is the key concept in American Studies, a closer examination of the concept and its uses should be worthwhile.

Of course the meaning of culture traditional in the humanities is not that implied here. It is used here in the sense common to the social sciences, and initiated in English by Tylor in his *Primitive Culture* in 1871.[6] The concept was developed gradually as the many travelers, scholars and merchants of the modern era observed that there were ways of life different from their own. A certain self-consciousness grew regarding ways of life and patterns of living.

Students of culture themselves have by no means been agreed as to the precise meaning of the word. In their monograph *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*, A. L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn include and comment on some 164 definitions. Despite differences in emphasis among definitions the authors suggest that most social scientists would define culture more or less as follows:

> Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other as conditioning elements of further action.[7]

Culture is a concept, an abstraction. It is not a thing. In the words of Kroeber and Kluckhohn: "Culture is an abstract description of *trends toward* uniformity in the words, acts, and artifacts of human groups."[8] Culture is not generally considered actual behavior itself, nor need the actual products or artifacts of culture be considered as culture itself. Cul-

6 Alfred L. Kroeber, "The Concept of Culture in Science," *Journal of General Education*, III (April 1949), 183.

7 Papers of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, Vol. XLVII–No. 1 (Cambridge, 1952), p. 181. Hereafter referred to as Kroeber and Kluckhohn.

8 Kroeber and Kluckhohn, p. 182.

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ture is that which is constructed by inference from behavior and artifacts. For instance there are a number of works of fiction called novels. None of these is exactly the same, yet they have certain common similarities. They are enough alike to be labelled "novels." The form exists only in its specific embodiments. In one sense the novel form is a culture pattern, a construct, inferred from all its specific embodiments. Ralph Linton makes a similar distinction when he differentiates between real culture patterns and culture construct patterns. Real culture patterns are all the actual novels. Culture construct patterns, which are formulated by students of culture, are the average patterns, the generalizations which describe the mode of specific actual occurrences.[9]

Many anthropologists distinguish between explicit or overt, and implicit or covert or latent culture.[10] There is some difference of opinion as to the exact meaning of these contrasting terms. One reason for the disagreement is that one's definition of covert culture depends on one's definition of culture in general. Linton, for instance, who includes behavior as part of culture, defines covert culture as "a matter of psychological states, and such states can only be inferred from the overt behavior to which it gives rise."[11] Those anthropologists who do not include overt behavior as part of their definition of culture, and to whom "culture" is entirely conceptual, define covert culture as those patterns, significances and values according to which people act, but of which they are unaware, in contrast to those values, patterns and significances on which they act, but of which they are aware. Kroeber and Kluckhohn refer to these covert culture phenomena as *cultural enthymemes*, or tacit premises.

> It looks to an inner coherence in terms of structuralizing principles that are taken for granted by participants in this culture as prevailing in the world. Patterns are forms—the implicit culture consists in interrelationships between forms, that is, of qualities which can be predicated only of two or more forms taken together.[12]

I think they are suggesting that behind two or more culture patterns, which on the surface seem dissimilar, one may find a third pattern, a tacit premise that is common to both. An example of an implicit culture pat-

9 Ralph Linton, *The Cultural Background of Personality* (New York, 1945), pp. 30-54.

10 Linton refers to overt and covert culture as do Bernard Bowron, Leo Marx and Arnold Rose, "Literature and Covert Culture," in Kwiat and Turpie, pp. 84-95. F. Stuart Chapin refers to latent patterns in "Latent Culture Patterns of the Unseen World of Social Reality," *American Journal of Sociology*, XL (July 1934), 61-68. Kroeber and Kluckhohn generally use explicit and implicit. See p. 157. A method of detecting covert culture is suggested by Arnold Rose in *Theory and Method in the Social Sciences* (Minneapolis, 1954), chap. xxi, "Popular Logic in the Study of Covert Culture."

11 Linton, p. 39. 12 Kroeber and Kluckhohn, p. 171.

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tern might be language. Usually a culture possesses a common language. Few Americans are aware that the patterns and relationships which structure the English language significantly determine how they think about reality, and that certain other languages are structured very differently. The subject-object relationship which is the basis of our sentence structure is not the only one possible. Without being aware of it, all Americans grow up using the same language and thinking about reality in that language, however else they differ.[13]

Because of the rather ambiguous use of the words explicit and overt; implicit, covert and latent among anthropologists themselves, an attempt at definition, clarification and comment for American Studies purposes may be worthwhile.

1) Culture is a pattern of constructs of modes of meanings, values and ideas about acting, inferred from noninstinctive human behavior. Behavior is human action and the products of action. Products of action include written artifacts of historic cultures including documents of all kinds; newspapers, manuscripts, books of fiction and poetry. Among artifacts of culture are paintings, music, sculpture and the products of technology and science.

Culture should be distinguished from society. Society is the group itself. Culture is the meanings, values and ideas about action which are in the minds of the members of a society.

2) A subculture is a group within a larger culture which can be characterized by certain patterns peculiar to itself.

A subculture should be distinguished from a group organized with a particular purpose in mind such as a political party, business, art appreciation club or denomination. These groups may be composed of persons from different subcultures. Usually a culture or subculture is not best described as goal-directed. A culture or subculture is a way of life. In America important subcultures have been sectional, national (immigrant), racial and religious. In 1850 some of the subcultures one could have observed were: Protestant New England, Irish Catholic New England; the Negro, Chinese and Indian; the Jewish, Pennsylvania Dutch and Shaker subcultures. It will be observed that in all cases these "rule of thumb" labels point to what was probably the most popularly obvious characteristic of each group.

3) All cultures are characterized by certain patterns of behavior. These are learned and passed on from generation to generation. They regularize virtually all the areas of life important to the existence of that culture. They involve customs of eating, housing, earning a living, rearing children, marrying, burying and worshiping. There is a certain variation of custom along a continuum. Of course no one event is exactly the same as another,

[13] See *Language, Thought and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*, ed. John B. Carroll (New York, 1956).

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but it is possible to describe what most of the members of a culture do most of the time in most areas of life. From their behavior is inferred the meanings, values and ideas about acting which inform it. From sermons delivered by the clergymen of any one denomination it is possible to derive a kind of pattern of what preachers and congregations expect in a sermon. That which is inferred from behavior or the products of behavior is a *culture construct pattern.* Many times when we speak of a culture construct pattern we shall actually mean a subculture construct pattern, because it is seldom that a pattern, especially before the late twentieth century, will be shared by all Americans.

4) In speaking of culture construct patterns it is possible to distinguish between those which are *avowed, masked* and *metapatterns.* I shall use this terminology to replace covert-overt, explicit-implicit, terms which suffer from considerable ambiguity.

An *avowed pattern* is one which is publicly practiced and expressly recognized by those who practice it. It is usually legal and openly approved. It is not necessarily a majority pattern for there are many minority culture patterns which are avowed. On the other hand a pattern may actually be shared by most members of a majority and not be avowed.

A *masked pattern* has at least some of the following characteristics: It is seldom openly discussed or publicly sanctioned, though it may be admitted in intimate groups. In some cases it is masked because the members of a culture do not realize that it is a generally shared pattern. In some cases virtually all members of a culture may be unaware that any pattern exists, not because it is consciously hidden, but because it is taken for granted. It is too habitual to be noticed. In some cases a pattern may be masked because it is repressed. Members of a culture may feel anxious about a particular danger or threat, but fear to admit their anxiety. Members of a culture may feel a kind of unmet need, but be unable to verbalize it. Often a masked culture pattern exists because it contradicts an already avowed pattern. Masked patterns must often be isolated by indirect means.

It should be emphasized that one makes a judgment of whether or not a pattern is masked or avowed along a continuum. There are no absolute distinctions. In American culture, where there are a number of culture detectives employed full-time, it is unlikely that a great many patterns will be completely masked. In many primitive societies much of the culture is masked simply because it is taken for granted. It should be noted that a pattern is not avowed or masked depending on the observer's point of view. It is avowed or masked according to the attitudes toward it, or the degree to which it is self-conscious among those who practice it.

A *metapattern* is one shared by two or more patterns. It is what has previously been labelled "implicit." The structure of language is a metapattern.

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It is shared by all participants in a culture possessing a common language.

The search for masked patterns and metapatterns is one of the most intriguing and difficult aspects of culture studies. Avowed patterns are usually obvious, though they differ in subtlety. It is an avowed pattern in contemporary American culture for Christians to go to church on Sunday. It is an avowed pattern for a politician to attack another politician or political party in terms which would not be allowed in another context. In the South segregation is an avowed pattern. All of these patterns are publicly practiced and expressly recognized and sanctioned. They are mostly ideas about action, though certain value patterns, sometimes masked, are implicit in them. It is an avowed pattern to seek profit in business or a higher wage for labor. On the other hand certain ways of making a profit are not avowed. We know they exist, but they are masked. In the North discrimination is often masked. If Mr. Kinsey is correct there are many masked sexual patterns. Four books will provide us with brief examples of the search for patterns in historic American culture.

a) *Railroad Leaders, 1845–1890: The Business Mind in Action* by Thomas C. Cochran. From an analysis of the business letter files of some sixty-one presidents of American railroads between 1845–90 the author abstracts norms (patterns) for social role, that is, for "a shared expectation of a general type of response to certain situations." "A primary aim . . . was to establish some norms of thought and attitude for American railroad presidents of the period. . . ." Before the study the author drew up a list of attitude categories including such headings as: expansion of business, competitors, social problems and innovation. In content analyzing the letters every significant expression of the writer's attitude toward those items included in the list was recorded. The result was a profile of the presidents' attitudes on those items. Insofar as many of the men shared similar attitudes on many of the items it is evident that patterns existed. Some of these patterns were avowed and others masked. It is possible that a great many of the attitudes were masked because the presidents may not have realized that what seemed to them private attitudes were so extensively shared by their fellow presidents. They were also masked since they would not have been openly acknowledged either to the general public or to the boards of directors of the railroad companies.[14]

b) *Popular Religion: Inspirational Books in America* by Louis Schneider and Sanford M. Dornbusch. This is a very carefully designed study of forty-six best sellers of inspirational religious literature (nonfiction) in America between 1875–1955. From the methodological standpoint alone *Popular Religion* is of interest to students of American Studies. The

14 (Cambridge, 1953), pp. 14, 15.

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authors composed a lengthy list of religious ideas. General headings in their list included: functions of religious faith; God, man and nature; changing the self and the world; salvation; wealth and health; ways of salvation. One subitem, for instance, was "religion brings physical health." Whenever this idea appeared in a paragraph of a book analyzed, it was recorded so that when the analysis was completed the proportion of the book devoted to that particular idea could be estimated. "After reading a paragraph, the reader recorded one or more coding categories which were explicitly treated in it." Two readers spent thirteen weeks reading thirty-one of the forty-six books paragraph by paragraph. Half of the books were assigned randomly to each reader. Two of the books were assigned to both readers and their classifications compared, paragraph by paragraph. Out of 212 possible categories both readers chose the same one 66 per cent of the time.[15]

While *Popular Religion* is intended primarily as a study in the sociology of American popular religion, it has considerable relevance to the culture-concept-approach to American Studies, for it locates certain patterns and trends in the minds of many Americans about religion, patterns not at all similar to the formal theology of many traditional churches. Many ideas found in these books are like those found in New Thought and Christian Science. Certainly these patterns are avowed in the sense that many of the authors of these books were well-known clergymen. On the other hand they have a masked quality in that no major denomination and very few responsible theologians would advocate "the power of positive thinking" and similar ideas. Nevertheless these ideas are popular among a large proportion of the American middle class. This study tends to confirm the suggestion of some American Studies scholars that masked patterns may be discovered through the investigation of certain small, seemingly eccentric movements such as New Thought that avow ideas which may be generally masked but still in the minds of many others. An avowed pattern of a small group may lead to a masked pattern in the larger culture.

c) *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* by R. W. B. Lewis. It is by no means necessary for American Studies to be entirely or even primarily concerned with high art, or with "great" American literature. Nevetheless this has been a fascination to many, and some of the frustrating problems of American Studies are a result of this preoccupation. Inquirers have sought patterns in the literature itself and have tried to use literature as an indicator of masked culture patterns. The idea has been that the images and metaphors

[15] (Chicago, 1958), p. viii.

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used in literature may by indirection express masked anxieties and value premises.[16]

In *The American Adam* Lewis locates in certain images used by several writers in the mid-nineteenth century the clue to a masked pattern in American literature, and by implication in American culture in general. ". . . the image contrived to embody the most fruitful contemporary ideas was that of the authentic American as a figure of heroic innocence and vast potentialities, poised at the start of a new history." [17] Presumably the discussion among American artists over the validity of such an image is the key to understanding everyone from Whitman to Melville. Obviously this is an attempt to isolate a masked pattern. The attempt is a failure for several reasons. In the first place a masked pattern, even if it exists, is not a magic key to understanding several complex works of art. But secondly, *The American Adam* fails because of defects of method common to American Studies generally. One of the most common sources of literary imagery is the Bible, and it is not at all unlikely that writers will make reference to Adam or the cluster of ideas associated with him. But this does not confirm the existence of a pattern, especially when references which explicitly contradict ideas associated with the image may be found. Such contradictory ideas are present in virtually all the authors included in *The American Adam.* Students should guard against projecting their own preoccupations into materials which, so to speak, cannot talk back. Actually *The American Adam* is more useful as an example of projection which indicates a somewhat masked pattern in our own contemporary culture, a pattern of ideas about the nature of modern man.

d) *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* by Henry Nash Smith. Through a wide variety of high and popular art, as well as purely descriptive documents, Smith finds myths and symbols which existed in the minds of many Americans during the nineteenth century. "Myth" and "symbol" are "words to designate larger and smaller units of the same kind of thing, namely an intellectual construction that fuses concept and emotion into an image." [18] The author has certainly isolated a pattern in American thought. His emphasis on the two-dimensional aspect of "myth" is also important. His presentation gives depth that is lacking in ordinary intellectual history. The patterns found were in some cases avowed, but as an influence on behavior they were often masked, for Americans may not have realized the extent to which they were influenced. In fact the resistance to some of Smith's insights may be an index to the power which this masked pattern still has in the American consciousness, and which some may not wish to examine critically. Yet I

[16] (Chicago, Phoenix Paperbacks, 1955). [17] Lewis, p. 1. [18] (New York, 1957), p. v.

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think it may be asked legitimately whether the terms myth and symbol are most useful. More often they confuse the issue, it seems to me, than clarify it, not only because they are words with long and devious histories from which it is difficult to disassociate them, but because they have a certain connotation of the divine and mysterious. So-called myths do not fuse concept and emotion into an image which is important in a culture unless the members of that culture already have a predisposition which makes such a myth appeal to them. There are many purely propositional kinds of documents which fuse concept and emotion without resort to the symbolism common in literature, the Gettysburg Address, for example. If myth becomes vital in a culture it is because it expresses an avowed or masked pattern of values. These were the values to which American agrarian culture has given expression many times. The Myth of the Garden is but one pattern of images which expresses this generally avowed value pattern. It becomes interesting when taken into an urban industrial situation where it no longer applies. A myth is simply a pattern of values which has real force in the life of a people and which has received metaphoric expression, as contrasted with values and ideas which have only intellectual appeal. The use of such words as "myth" and "symbol" tends to obscure rather than emphasize this distinction. To refer to a pattern as a myth only implies that it is no longer masked.

The four books dealt with above are all attempts to discern patterns in American culture. Each book hypothesizes certain culture construct patterns. The problem of theory and method in American Studies is especially evident in the last two, particularly because of the complications of dealing with imaginative literature. But if the theory informing research is carefully worked out in advance it should aid and clarify. One reason a concern for precise definition is important is that it helps avoid confusion such as that over just what covert and overt culture patterns are. Another reason is that it helps ensure that terms are "operational." According to Cafgna: "A term is said to be operationally defined when it is used to connote properties which are empirically observable and measurable." [19] Measurement of the kind customary in sociology and psychology is not often useful in culture studies, but it is necessary that the evidence on which conclusions are based be observable in some way. Studies which deal with modern literate cultures at particular times in the past have a special problem. Unlike contemporary cultures, historic cultures cannot be observed "in the flesh," so to speak. All that remain are artifacts, the products of past behavior, written and material. It would

[19] Albert Carl Cafgna, "A Formal Analysis of Definitions of 'culture'," in *Essays in the Science of Culture*, eds. Gertrude E. Dole and Robert L. Carneiro (New York, 1960), pp. 111-32.

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seem to me that the student of historical American Studies would gain from explicitly recognizing that real culture, for his purposes, is defined as those documents and artifacts which survive from the historical period under study. These are empirically observable. When he infers avowed or masked patterns he is doing so on the basis of this evidence. He need not assume that the actual historic culture was the same as the artifacts remaining, for such an assumption would be impossible to prove. This distinction is important because it enables the student to avoid endless disputes over matters for which there can be no final proof. Historic culture is defined in terms of the surviving evidence, and findings and disputes about findings confined to that evidence. The methodological problem then becomes how to infer patterns from the products of behavior, i.e., cultural artifacts.

American Studies method involves three stages of approach. First one perceives a pattern. Certain patterns are obvious, but many are not. Probably the original perception will be an insight or intuition. This will then be stated clearly and explicitly in the form of a hypothesis. The second stage involves proving the hypothesis true or false. Since scholarship is an undertaking that requires co-operation of many, it is best that it proceed according to a kind of public standard. The evidence must be public and convincing. The third stage is that of presentation of findings to other scholars. I will not deal with either stage one or three except for the following observation. I think Roy Harvey Pearce is referring to the method of presentation when he writes:

> It may well be that one of the main achievements of the American Studies movement will be its contribution toward a new kind of historiography, in which intellectual history becomes not a matter of ideas analyzed but of ideas dramatized, ideas so placed in their cultural matrix that they are shown to be possible beliefs.[20]

This is what imaginative anthropologists have been doing for some time when writing about primitive cultures, but Pearce's suggestion succinctly describes the work of Perry Miller, Henry Nash Smith and other scholars. The great virtue of their work at its best is that it communicates a kind of sympathetic inner understanding of historic American culture. Their books are almost works of high art. But their weakness is that they tend to depend too much on their own authority, on what might be described as impressionism. Another scholar, using the same documents, might come to very different conclusions. The traditional method of footnoting is inadequate because the purpose of the study is not documenta-

20 "'The American Adam' and the State of American Studies," *Journal of Higher Education*, XXVII (February 1956), 106.

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tion of one particular event, as in history, but the discovery of patterns shared by many. A case in point where the inadequacy of method shows very clearly is Lewis' treatment of Theodore Parker in *The American Adam*. He forces his personages into preconceived categories and thus comes up with a pattern. In the case of Parker he ignores a mass of well documented evidence that runs counter to his whole interpretation. If there were better understood canons of method and for the use of documents this would not be quite so easy to do. Thus we turn to the second stage in the methodological paradigm. How can a hypothesis of a culture construct pattern, avowed or masked, be proved in such a way that the evidence, so to speak, will speak for itself to anyone who examines it? How can an undue amount of subjectivity be avoided in research?

There are two problems involved. The first, in the terminology of social science, is sampling. One can substantiate almost any hypothesis if the statements used as evidence are taken out of context or are not representative. One can generalize about Orestes Brownson, or Theodore Parker, or Emerson and be almost meaningless, unless some indication is given of the period meant and the documentary basis. If one is searching for patterns which characterize several writers how does one equate stages in the lives of different persons? Even when one is making studies of a somewhat more impersonal nature in the realm of popular culture what sampling procedures does one use? At the very least the scholar should state what his sample is and how he took it. It is not enough to say that one is familiar with all the literature of a particular period, for even if this is true one must deal with selections from it and justify one's selection. Usually a sample should be representative, and if it is not the reader should be warned. Further study needs to be given to the problem of the representativeness of samples used in American Studies.

Besides the sampling problem itself, it must be shown that the hypothesized pattern exists therein. Perhaps there are several ways to do this, but I would suggest that one very likely way is by content analysis. There are those who argue that this is only useful in studies of mass communications, not in high art, but this is only partly true. Content analysis cannot do justice to high art in its totality, but it can provide a useful protection against unsubstantiated generalization. As Schneider and Dornbusch remark: "Content analysis can perform an important sensitizing function. It enables a certain control of various elements in a body of material that might otherwise be hard to come by. But these outcomes can be expected, of course, only if the analysis is imaginatively, and not mechanically used." [21] If it is claimed that a particular image or pattern of values is

[21] P. viii.

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especially significant in a writer or writers, it is possible to use content analysis to discover the frequency with which it appears as well as the author's attitude toward it. Content analytic techniques are constantly being refined to accommodate more complex and subtle problems. A number of studies already made demonstrate its usefulness. Besides *Popular Religion* and *Railroad Leaders* two briefer examples might be "The Image of the Scientist in Science Fiction: A Content Analysis," and "The World of the Daytime Serial." [22] Certainly it is a method which can help establish patterns and guard against over-subjectivity.

The problem of the use or even appropriateness of high literature as an object of culture study has occupied the attention of American Studies scholars for some time. While the words and grammatical forms in a work of fiction are the same as those in other documents, their use is based on a different premise. A work of fiction is the creation of a disciplined imagination. It is the molding of selected experience into dynamic verbal form. It is a combination of thought and feeling, logic and emotion. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. It cannot be taken for an objective description of reality. Neither the characters nor the scenes, neither the comments that the characters make, nor even the words of the narrator are to be taken literally. Fiction, in a sense, exists outside of real culture. As literature it is created and should be judged according to canons of its own genre.

It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that because a work of literary art has its own special characteristics, that it is somehow completely *acultural.* It is obvious, for instance, that the greater part of the meaning of the words and symbols an author uses is already shared by him with his culture. In what way is it possible to approach culture through literature while still giving due consideration to the art? Below I will suggest one very limited application of the culture theory of American Studies to high literature.

Culture is a pattern of constructs of modes of meanings, values and ideas about acting, inferred from noninstinctive human behavior. Part of any particular culture consists of beliefs about how particular individuals should act. These beliefs have a personal and a public side. We expect others to act in certain predictable ways, and we have similar expectations of ourselves. We shall call such ways of predictable behavior

22 Walter Hirsch, *American Journal of Sociology,* LXIII (March 1958), 506-12. Rudolf Arnheim, *Radio Research 1942-43,* P. F. Lazarsfeld and Frank Stanton, eds. (New York, 1944). There are a number of useful and suggestive articles on "qualitative content analysis." Among them is Siegfried Kracauer's "The Challenge of Qualitative Content Analysis," *Public Opinion Quarterly,* XVI (1952-53), 631-42.

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"roles." Expectations of oneself are "personal roles," and expectations of others, or that others have of us are "public roles." If someone is a college professor, for instance, the college administration, students and general public expect him to act in certain predictable ways. At the same time the professor has expectations of himself which are generally in rough accord with what others expect of him. Every culture defines the roles which its participants usually play. Role is more or less defined according to sex, age, occupation and status. When one examines any culture, simple or complex, one possible approach is through the role expectations of that culture, through the beliefs that people have about how individuals perform or should perform.

If we examine a work of fiction in the light of the foregoing, we find that in many cases it assumes expectations of personal and social role. In a great many cases the focus of interest centers on the conflict between the personal role expectations of the main character and social role expectations. Sometimes the conflict is internal, i.e., the character knows and himself believes in the social role expected of him by his culture, but because of impulse or other reason is unable to fulfill it. Arthur Dimmesdale, for instance, suffers because his behavior has violated the expectations of his culture regarding the ministry. Much of the point of *Elmer Gantry* lies in the obvious contrast between the behavior of the preacher and the expectations which the writer's audience had of the minister's role.

Another story that involves a minister is "The Strength of God" in Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*. "The Strength of God" tells of the inner conflict through which the Rev. Curtis Hartman goes when he discovers that from his study window in the church bell tower he can see a local school teacher, Kate Swift, as she sits and reads after she has gone to bed. Much of the story is told through the guilty sensibility of the pastor, though the author is not far in the background and there is a good deal of plain narration. The minister prays for the strength to keep from spying on the teacher, but he is not given it, and he gives in to what he considers his evil impulses. The climax is reached when a naked and distraught Kate Swift appears on her bed one late night, and in her despair, the cause of which is unknown to the minister looking from his window, begins to pray. The terrible irony of the situation is revealed to the minister, and he interprets the event as a sign from God. He is delivered from his temptation.

"The Strength of God" deals with several characters in various roles, but the focus of character is Curtis Hartman in at least three roles: male, husband, minister. Anderson tells us something about him in all three roles. Is it possible to analyze the role expectations which the author attributes to his character and from them infer something about real

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culture? Does the story tell us anything about early-twentieth-century ministers and American culture? What are the alternative answers to the question?

1) Since he is an imaginary character in an imaginary town, the minister's personal and social role expectations have no validity. Art is a kind of sleight of hand affair in which the author tricks the reader into belief. Nothing can be learned about real culture.

2) Despite the fact that "The Strength of God" is not intended to be a realistic short story, it must, to a degree, reflect real culture. If the ways in which it reflects real culture can be isolated, then it may be useful in culture studies. The question then is: In some way are the expectations of the Rev. Mr. Hartman connected with real culture? Can this be proved?

The value to culture studies of a work of fiction such as "The Strength of God" depends, it seems to me, on what we are looking for when we consider the two positions stated above. Certainly Hartman and everything in Winesburg are the creation of a unique imagination. It would be foolish to think of Winesburg as a real town or of Hartman as a real minister, or of either as somehow the prototype of their kind. Anderson himself said as much. Yet perhaps it is equally foolish to give up the use of fiction in culture studies with that admision, for in culture studies *we are not exploring the real world, but rather what people believe about the real world.* We do not study behavior, but beliefs about behavior.

I would suggest that a useful approach is to examine the Rev. Mr. Hartman, not for himself, but rather for what his characterization tells us, indirectly, about his creator, and perhaps about the creator's audience. A work of fiction involves the judicious selection of experience which is given verbal form. But the selection of experience is not random. The very essence of fiction is the effect (or affect) that the author wishes to realize through his selection and forming of experience. This tacitly involves a premise on his part that the meanings he expresses in carefully chosen words and images will have a certain predictable echo in the reader. True, in many cases the author will express himself in relatively private images and meanings which the reader will only partially share, but even these will be discovered by the critic over a period of time. Much of the effect of literature is created by associations which the reader makes in his own mind, not spelled out by the author, but which the author can depend on to occur. For instance in "The Strength of God" Anderson tells us that Hartman's wife was the daughter of an underwear manufacturer, and he, of a Muncie wagon maker. Such details, if taken literally, seem somewhat irrelevant, but if taken for what they *suggest,* become powerful. They will only suggest something if the author and the reader share many tacit meanings, significances and values.

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If the above argument is correct then it becomes possible to say more specifically what use a work of fiction has as a culture document. Its use is not direct. It would be a most serious error to try to find out about actual ministers from "The Strength of God," but it is possible to examine a work of fiction for what it tells us about the expectations, values and meanings of the author, and more importantly, of those shared by him with at least some of his readers. One assumes that the selection of experience has some shaping purpose, and that such experience will in turn stimulate certain associations, meanings, prejudices, often of a very ambiguous kind, in the mind of the reader. The very fact that an author includes or does not include certain details of experience is significant. While the selection and its form depend on the canons of the art, it also depends on the mind of the culture in which the work of art is created.

In "The Strength of God" Anderson tells us that Hartman was a Presbyterian minister, that he was well liked by his congregation, that he was just a mediocre preacher, that he was serious if not enthusiastic in his faith, that he had certain attitudes toward women and sex. The curious thing, though, is that we know more about the Rev. Mr. Hartman than Anderson tells us, and this is because the details included in the story suggest to us as readers a whole complex of expectations about Protestant religion of a certain kind, and about ministers. These expectations have a long history in American culture. If one looks at the small details in the story it becomes possible to "date" it even more specifically, because while there may be a general set of culture patterns of long duration, there are some of brief duration. Hartman was "horror stricken at the thought of a woman smoking." It is unlikely that a writer of the later twentieth century would include such a detail.

It seems evident that the role expectations of characters in fiction tell us something about the expectations of authors and readers, which in turn lead the student to the value patterns of a culture. Likewise the author's selection of experience suggests what may have meaning to others in his culture.

The above is only one small way in which fiction may be approached as a culture document. If possible, insights based on literature should be supplemented by evidence from other sources. Many other approaches need to be explored. Does the choice of a focus of narration, for instance, sometimes help the author express meanings that he could not otherwise easily express, as in *Huckleberry Finn,* or *Catcher in the Rye?* Looking upon certain great symbolic and especially ambiguous works of fiction as a kind of verbal Rorschach, would it be possible to use a generation's reaction to them as a kind of projection, and to analyze their reactions

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for masked patterns? *Moby-Dick* might be a good subject for such a study. Would it be possible to take certain images that appear in a work of fiction with a kind of double meaning and look at the less socially acceptable meaning for evidence of a masked pattern? In "The Strength of God," for instance, Hartman spies on Kate Swift through a hole in the corner of a stained glass window picturing "Christ laying his hand on the head of a child." One gets the feeling that the child is staring up at Christ and this one associates with the minister staring up at Kate Swift. What did Anderson have in mind? Surely it wasn't an avowed culture pattern. Could this be generalized in any way beyond the author's private vision? These are a few of many unanswered questions.

No doubt many techniques will be developed to approach a work of art for culture studies. No such technique will ever do full justice to the creation as a work of art, but that is not the purpose of American Studies anyway. We might as well reconcile ourselves to the fact that criticism and culture studies, however legitimate both may be, approach literature with different needs and purposes. The American Studies scholar is obliged to recognize the special character of high literature, but such a recognition need not prevent him from using literary documents for his own purposes.

In this paper I have tried to outline a consistent approach to American Studies based on the concept of culture, culture pattern and culture construct pattern. Such an approach is truly interdisciplinary, unites many of the seemingly disparate methods used so far, and suggests rewarding ways in which to approach the subject and solve the problem of method. It also has implications for the teaching of American Studies which I would like to mention briefly in closing.

Given this concept of American Studies, its teaching would logically be concentrated in three areas: concept, method and content. Basic to any curriculum should be a course in the meaning and development of the concept of culture and its application to American Studies. In the areas of method, besides training in general approaches to culture, certain courses should impart the special knowledge of technique necessary for the study of written artifacts of modern literate societies. These courses should include historiography, communications analysis, the craft of fiction, methods of social research and perhaps one in the projective techniques used in contemporary psychological testing. Content courses would be those concerned with whatever "American" it is in which the student wishes to specialize. Thus the American Studies curriculum would not only be interdisciplinary but possessed of a logical and methodological unity.

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