

## *Love and Death in the American Novel*<sup>\*</sup>

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LESLIE FIEDLER's reliance on facile Freudian/Jungian terms too flexible to insure literary probability would negate the effect of even the incisiveness and conspicuous number of his insights, were his erotic symbology not made responsible, finally, to cultural causes advanced. The terms must be tolerated because they are his pride, and because they are sometimes undeniably operative. Yet his conclusions are far less tentative when attached to history, relatively visible and therefore verifiable.

In his conception, what distinguishes American literature from European sources has been the eminence of our gothic mode over the sentimental. The pattern of threatened sexual violation in the original, Richardsonian novel of sentiment was representative, in part, of the British bourgeoisie's resentment of aristocratic privilege. Transported, however to a new land where such class distinctions were less meaningful, the genre declined except as it was exploited by numbers of no longer profoundly analytical female writers, restless with their status in a male world and anxious to remain, in fiction, Pure Victim: the eternally seduced.

Instead, America's major writers adapted the gothic devices of Horace Walpole to the dramatization of their common sense of guilt for having aspired too freely and having denied depravity too readily. In Fiedler's chosen masterworks—*The Scarlet Letter*, *Moby Dick*, *Huckleberry Finn*—

<sup>\*</sup> Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York: Criterion, 1960).

a Faustian pact is always central. The Puritan revolt, the war of independence, the rejection of tradition implicit in continuous immigration, every encounter with undeniable and unromantic hardship on the shifting frontier wilderness, dispossession of the Indians and the acknowledgment of slavery as a perversion of Enlightened principles, the pragmatic re-orientation—the new world's experience offered a surfeit of occasions to trouble any man of conscience. Not because they wrote in the Calvinist tradition, but because they felt they had denied its innermost truths, Americans expressed their insecurity through devices suggestive of their writhing under mind.

SO TRANSCENDENT was the new ego that love became only one more passion greedily to accumulate, a death-wish because inexhaustible. The show of violence in American novels is the shadow only for psychological male impotence. Marriage is considered an emasculation or the occasion for man's betrayal of his inability to love. Marriage, too, might threaten the image of mother and consequently force an abandonment of that very regression to childhood, to eternal beginnings, in which Americans so often have sought a substitute innocence. Significantly, even those masterpieces which do not have juveniles as heroes, are considered children's books. Impotence, and the refuge in male virginity unchallenged, is often symbolized as well by "homoerotic" relationships, camaraderie in the absence of women.

Nevertheless, the symbolic imagination of a Hawthorne, a Melville, a Twain is fundamentally moral. The very impulse to find refuge increases their sense of guilt: and even their juveniles face the terrors of initiation; and "homoerotics" take as companion Indian or Negro, some dark secret sharer though never totally embraced because even metaphorical miscegenation remains taboo; their innocents suddenly find themselves involved in incest, admitting the oedipal triangle implicit in their revolts and not pretending to love triangles substituted by sentimental novelists. Ambiguities define the sensibility of tragic humanists: there lies the salvation of American weaknesses, in the strength to confess them.

Such a reading of American culture through literature provides stimulus for reconsiderations potentially more searching than Parrington. Fiedler himself may have after thoughts — about the need for testing his hypotheses, jargon aside, against other literary forms: poetry; critical essays: since, if he is right, these too should respond to cultural differences described.

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### The Prince is a Cheat

**T**HE SESSION COURT in Kuala Lumpur, Malaya jailed the son of the Malayan ambassador in Paris, Tengku (Prince) Abdul Hamid Bin Tengku Ismail, for one year on two charges of cheating people seeking land.

The Tengku, twenty-seven, was found guilty of having cheated two people of (M)\$130 each by falsely claiming that he had been authorized to allocate land to the landless in a remote village in May this year.

The prosecutor told the court that the accused had actually cheated illiterate village people and the money was asked for by him dishonestly.

The defense counsel said that what actually the Tengku had tried was to get land without the sanction of the government.

He said the accused believed sincerely that he could clear the forest reserve and thereby occupy the land.

The accused denied cheating the people but said the money was given to him as loan.

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