

ABSTRACT

America's White Whale: The Inescapable Search for an Impossible Identity is concerned with questions of American identity as explored in American literature. It explores how Sinclair Lewis, Herman Melville, and Mark Twain, all writers of American classics explored American identity in their writing. My thesis explores how these men viewed the United States and why, considering the question of why Americans have been so concerned with defining the nation from its earliest days. I argue that American identity is fraught because of a fear that without it the nation cannot exist and because the grand ideals of the nation are rarely present in its realities creating a tension between a descriptive and prescriptive identity. I argue that ultimately American identity is always multiple because of the diversity within the nation and that it changes constantly as Americans try to come closer to their ideals with the result that no true portrait of the nation can be contained within a single work, but because Americans care so much about their national identity they cannot stop writing about the nation.

America's White Whale: The Inescapable Search for an Impossible

Identity

Emma Anderson

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INTRODUCTION

In his 1944, *The Literary Fallacy*, Bernard DeVoto railed against what he considered Van Wyck Brooks' inordinate influence on post-World War I American literature and understanding of American identity. DeVoto felt that Brooks, in *America's Coming of Age* (1915) and *Letters and Leadership* (1918), was completely and disastrously wrong about American literature. At the core of Brooks' thesis was the notion that America (a term used here to mean the United States) needed to create a literary academy of its own, and moreover, it was vital that it create an American culture, which Brooks considered non-existent. Brooks states that "One looks out to-day over the immense vista of our society...and one realizes what it means to possess no cultural tradition filling in the interstices of energy and maintaining a steady current of life over the ebb and flow of individual purposes, of individual destinies!" (Brooks xiii). It is this lack of culture in America as compared to Europe that he continues to bemoan, and it is this void he describes that American writers proceeded to attempt to fill. According to DeVoto, Brooks' greatest failing was "repeatedly to make statements for which he had the warrant of no knowledge whatsoever" (DeVoto 31). Such wording is not the decorous language of criticism; instead DeVoto's language was blunt and vituperative. DeVoto disapproved of all of Brooks' choices, from the literature he read to his project of even trying to understand

America through literature alone. The conclusions Brooks drew from that project, asserted DeVoto, colored the way writers spoke about America, misrepresented the nation as having no identity of its own.

DeVoto's frustration and anger centered on what he saw as Brooks' insistence that "the measure of a culture is in its literature" (DeVoto 37). In DeVoto's opinion, Brooks believed literature was the hallmark of a culture and should lead it. DeVoto is correct in his reading. For Brooks, if America had ever been on the path of true culture he certainly could find no evidence of it. Instead, America had been bowled over by industrialism (Brooks 50) in the wake of Puritanism. The result was a devastated state of American literature. In his view industrialization was able to take hold in America because there were few writers who could keep alive memories of the country's great past. In some sense this failure was inevitable, because America lacked a past that Brooks considered usable. This statement about industrialization follows his conclusion that America possessed no culture of its own, having moved from Puritanism to industrialism with little to salvage for culture in his mind. He saw the twentieth century as one calling for creative life and declared America woefully ill-equipped for the geopolitics and technology of the young century because "the social fabric is too simple to be able to cope with the complicated strain that has suddenly been put on it by a radical change in the conditions of life" (Brooks 55).

DeVoto's list of concerns included concern with historical inaccuracy. This inaccuracy allowed Brooks to paint Europe as superior in large part because the image of America he presented came not from reality but from assumptions.

DeVoto responded to with an American defensiveness to Brooks' Anglophilia, which did not allow for an America which was both different from Britain and still worthy. DeVoto asked of Brooks "By what warrant, one is continually asking, by what arrogance or blind folly, does a critic who obviously has never inquired into his subject-matter presume to manufacture judgment out of ignorance?" (DeVoto 42). This question contains an accusation of harm, on which DeVoto elaborated.

DeVoto's anger stemmed from the conviction that in attempting to create a literary academy Brooks would impose an identity on America that did not fit, just as he did when he wrote about America without understanding it. DeVoto saw not the cultureless nation painted by Brooks above, but rather a nation that was developing its own culture on the back of events unique to the nation. His scathing judgment of Brooks' near dismissal of historical events appears in criticism of Brooks' discussion of slavery and Mexican-American War as spoken of in James Russell Lowell's *The Bigelow Papers*. Brooks suggested that if only there had been appropriate material to draw from in the real world Lowell could have "risen to" more strictly social issues. DeVoto points out that Brooks apparently possessed no understanding either of Lowell or his time, as at that period of American history the nation faced "three social issues of overwhelming importance, of importance so great that the nature and even the existence of society depended on them - slavery, developing industrialism, and the expansion of our national domain" (DeVoto 33). Those three issues, of course, figured heavily in the Mexican-American War, and as a result led to the Civil War, an

event vital to understanding America because it fundamentally changed the nation, and to dismiss them as somehow outside the purview of the ‘social type’ of issues when they were fundamental to society angered DeVoto. In essence, his complaint is that Brooks urged American literature to stray from American realities. According to DeVoto, Brooks failed to understand the multiplicity of America and important issues that shaped the nation. He blamed Brooks for promoting the creation of an American literary Academy that would alienate American writers from their subject.

DeVoto argued that authors who otherwise might have succeeded in writing about a vibrant American culture were given the wrong signals. Indeed “writers had been told that the Americans were an inferior people, that America was not a worthy subject of art, that America was in fact hostile to art” (DeVoto 46) and so writers could conclude they had little in common with cultureless Americans. DeVoto took Brooks’ critical observations as a personal offense.

Why DeVoto was so angry is interesting. He was not angry because of Brooks’ idea of the primacy of literature as he claimed to be, rather he felt that Brooks’ version of what the literature should be was wrong. If literature were not meant to define the nation, then an incorrect definition in literature would be of no matter as it could simply be ignored. Instead he did believe literature should speak about culture; it simply needed to do so in a different way than Brooks insisted. DeVoto conceded that writers in Brooks’ camp already had “the praiseworthy intention to sift and analyze American life” (DeVoto 44), it was just that he felt they had gone about it incorrectly. His problem is one of definition. He wanted

American literature to be able to define America, and his distress came from a conviction that this goal had yet to be achieved combined with great anxiety about what precisely the answer to the question of American identity was. This is precisely the same question that so captivated Brooks:

That nationalities are the workshops of humanity, that each nationality has a special duty to perform, a special genius to exert, a special gift to contribute to the general stock of civilization, and that each, in consequence, growing by the trust that other nationalities place in it, must be a living, homogeneous entity, with its own faith of consciousness of self – could any idea more perfectly than this express the dream, the necessity, of Young America? (Brooks 60)

The weight of this question is clear in DeVoto's fury at answers that he deems incorrect and in Brooks' almost plaintive question above, which posited that if America was to become a meaningful, worthwhile nation it had to have an understanding of itself and of the unique achievements it could offer the world, and which seems to beg the reader to have an answer for what those achievements might be. DeVoto passionately wants American authors to deliver material that helps clarify the "identity question" at the core of our literature.

Yet, writers are foolish to make such attempts without recognizing that they can never be entirely successful. American literature has a long and storied tradition of attempting to define American identity and to create it. It is a trend that goes back at least as far as Emerson, who insisted that any Americans who followed false ideas of 'good,' seeking money or power, could find a better path if

they fully understood the power of scholarship (Emerson 99). As one of the earliest American writers, and one who sought to create a truly American body of literature, Emerson's conviction that the literature he sought was necessary to the nation stands as a precursor to American writers like Brooks. When Brooks expressed a desire for an American literary academy to lead the nation he was not actually straying far from Emerson's idea that literature and scholarship should be the primary forces for good within American culture. The scholar Emerson spoke of who would be able to lead the nation, according to Emerson, had to be American. Europeans could not to lead a nation that, in large part, created itself to be the antithesis of Europe. That decision had certainly been made when the Declaration was written, but it started much earlier when both religious and colonial settlements of Europeans in the New World sought opportunities and freer methods of carrying them out than European cultures allowed. In his conviction that America will be lead by American scholars, Emerson made clear his own belief that American scholarship and writing would create an American identity, and this conviction continued to flourish in America after his death as the nation continued the work of defining itself as something new, and as something better than the nations of Europe. Such goals aided, rather than harmed, his dedication to individualism. In "Self Reliance" Emerson declares "To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men,-that is genius" (Emerson 175), and that same conviction lies at the heart of the idea that America must create its own identity. In calling for an America led by American scholars Emerson calls not for an America where

everyone believed the same things or followed those scholars blindly, but rather for an America that created itself not in the image of Europe, but instead in the image of American scholars who thought for themselves. The resulting nation could not help but be multiple, but it could be wholly American, shaped by American individuals more ready to think for themselves than Europeans.

This thesis seeks to address why a literary definition of American identity remained so pressing over the centuries. Van Wyck Brooks wrote almost eighty years after Emerson, DeVoto a hundred years, but both men grappled with the subject as if the nation was as young as it was for Emerson. In addressing such a question, it is important to look at the literature itself, not merely glance at it through literary criticism. The trouble of selecting the literature to read is that so much of American writing tells a part of this story, and it would be impossible to cover every part in a single document. This thesis does not deal with genre fiction such as crime novels or westerns, which have flourished in America and certainly have constructed particular identities of American masculinity. Neither does it deal with the ways American women, Americans of color, or other Americans outside of the so-called 'literary canon' have attempted to construct their own identities as Americans. Instead it focuses on three authors from that literary canon who wrote with issues of American identity at the core of their work.

These authors include Sinclair Lewis, whose novels of the early twentieth century paint satirical and scathing portraits of America; Herman Melville, whose shorter tales can certainly be said to say as much about America as his famous epic *Moby Dick*; and Mark Twain, who quite explicitly did not believe that a

Great American Novel could exist in a country as diversely fragmented as the United States of America. Others besides Twain have concluded that such a unifying American identity as Brooks so desperately sought is uniquely impossible for America. In considering the writing of America, Geoff Ward refers to a story Robert Creeley told him: A German friend of Creeley's told him that even during the worst of Hitler's control of the country "when I wrote or said anything it never occurred to me I wasn't writing for all of Germany. Not writing to it, but as a person of it. Never thought of myself as separated" (Ward 13). Creeley told him that he could not imagine anyone who would presume to think they were all of America. He was perhaps overconfident in that assessment, given the people who have tried to write with just that spirit, but the principle stands. No Americans could say in truth that they were the entire nation even if they believed themselves to be correct. This paper aims to discover why, given this truth, Americans continue to try, and are so consumed with the attempt and where they so often go wrong.

The need for an American identity traces its roots beyond literature, to the very project of America. Sacvan Bercovitch, exploring the idea that American identity has its roots in the Puritans, states that John Winthrop, a Puritan leader, viewed America as a promise of a new world as the old one fell. It "was to be a refuge for those whom God "means to save out of this generall calamitie" (Bercovitch 102). In order to be such a "new world," however, the settlements on the continent had to be different from Europe, and not just different, but better. Such dreams gained strength in the founding of the nation, with a declaration of

the truths that were to define America and the ways it would lead the world. The Declaration of Independence was a statement of purpose and of ideals. If the truths were not self-evident, if men were not equal, if they did not have the right to govern themselves, then such a declaration would have been absurd. As a result, America decided that it needed those statements to be true, and to be true about the nation, even though, as Mark Twain, in particular, makes clear in his writing, the nation was not practicing such equality no matter how avidly it preached it. That need for America to reflect its founding words in the face of its inability to do so has dogged Americans. It has made the question of identity inescapable and agonizing, and the literature of America tells that story of seeking an answer while terrified it does not exist.

SINCLAIR LEWIS

It is easy to make the argument that Sinclair Lewis criticized America and its people through satire in his novels. Even if a reader did not pick up on the criticism at the center of novels such as *Babbitt* and *Main Street*, it is hard to believe that anyone could fail to see it in *It Can't Happen Here*. This obvious satire points its weapons at the nation's complacency, nationalism, blind pride, conformity, and intolerance through a variety of literary techniques. These methods are not the focus here. Instead this chapter concerns itself with the conception of American identity Lewis reveals in his critiques of that culture and the ways he struggles with that concept. Lewis seemed to believe that there was indeed a single American identity, and the methods he uses to show that America has a single identity (an idea woven through his books in the form of pressures to conform) are fascinating – and questionable.

The first step in the investigation is to understand how Lewis saw American identity. At the core of his understanding of America is the idea of a nationalized small town. Nowhere is this more explicit than in *Main Street* where Lewis first sets up the town where most of the book takes place, Gopher Prairie, as a small, close minded, ignorant place where the main character, Carol Kennicott, feels starved of any culture. Although later events will make this assessment clearer, the truth of the town is presented with moderate accuracy by

the first exchange Carol has with Vida Sherwin, a local teacher. Having already begun to chafe at the sense that no one in the town can see it for the provincial backwards place that she knows it to be, Carol is greatly relieved to hear Vida say of Gopher Prairie “It’s a dear loyal town (and isn’t loyalty the finest thing in the world!) but it’s a rough diamond, and we need you for the polishing, and we’re ever so humble—” (*Main Street* 67). Carol’s delight at discovering someone in Gopher Prairie who agrees with her assessment that the town is ugly and needs improvement is, however, very short lived. In response to Carol’s excited suggestion that perhaps she might arrange for an architect to come and give a lecture in the town Vida says “Don’t you think it would be better to work with existing agencies?” (*Main Street* 67) and suggests Carol teach Sunday school instead. Carol sees such a suggestion as being of an entirely different nature than what she had suggested, and Lewis himself by choosing her as his point of view character and the one who is more modern and progressive than the rest of the town seems to agree. Rural America is presented in this way as being uncultured and uninterested in changing that status.

These failings are initially presented as being particular to small towns, especially in *Main Street*, however even there the suggestion is made that they are also fundamental to America. The words come again from Vida, who is made to be the figure of American progress and social change (in her willingness to pay lip service to such change while not actually changing anything at all). Attempting to convince Carol to be kinder to Gopher Prairie Vida tells her “Gopher Prairie standards are as reasonable to Gopher Prairie as Lake Shore

Drive standards are to Chicago. And there's more Gopher Prairies than there are Chicagos" (*Main Street* 96). The message she tries to communicate to Carol so sincerely is one that Lewis is conveying to the reader with a sense of despair – no matter how many cities America boasts, no matter how radical thought in those cities is, no matter how much those cities may see themselves as modern the truth is that America as a whole is made up of small towns like Gopher Prairie, and their attitudes are the truths of America, taking precedence over those of any cities.

This idea that the clannish, conservative, and self-centered attitudes of Gopher Prairie are in fact the attitudes of the nation as a whole is presented originally by Vida, but upon examination of more of Lewis' writing it appears that he agrees with her, although he is less pleased about it. Such attitudes define Zenith, as it appears in both *Babbitt* and *Dodsworth*. With its solid American boosterism and concern with business -- as evidenced by Dodsworth's uncertainty about what to do if he is not working and by the elevation of business locations in *Babbitt* to the status of places of worship -- Zenith is boring and, for all its excitement about modernity, it is no more progressive in reality than Gopher Prairie. Something very similar occurs in *It Can't Happen Here*, where such values take over the nation in a way that is dramatic to say the least. It is possible to read the novel as Lewis' overt attack on Huey Long of Louisiana and the fear of his rising to the Presidency, ideas that were certainly in Lewis' mind as he wrote. Even without that knowledge, a reader can see that the principles guiding the lives of the residents of Gopher Prairie are not so far from those the novel

dramatizes as leading to the rise of a fascist government in the United States. The same fondness for conformity and order that Carol hopes to change guide Senator Windrip in *It Can't Happen Here*.

These towns and cities define what Lewis believes America to be. In creating fictional cities and towns, authors have the freedom to pick names that they feel suit their purposes. As a result, the choice to name the town in *Main Street* Gopher Prairie is interesting. It is a very plain name, for a very plain place, simply a description of a prairie filled with gophers. It is also an intrinsically American name, as gophers live only in the new world. In its simplicity, it fits the town's idea of itself as a village of simple folks, and Vida's statement that there are more towns like it than there are Chicagos is linked to Lewis' idea that America wants to be simple at all costs and will push away any hints of 'culture' as too un-American. The characters of Gopher Prairie even examine themselves for any signs of self-aggrandizement - the Jolly Seventeen Club, which, despite sharing members with the more intellectually driven women's club the Thanatopsis, "guffawed at the Thanatopsis and considered it middle-class and even 'highbrow'" (*Main Street* 88). This celebration of mediocrity makes a name as blandly descriptive as Gopher Prairie as perfect for the town of *Main Street* as Zenith is perfect for *Babbitt*. The city of Zenith strives to be as average as it possibly can be in spite of its firm adherence to the idea of American exceptionalism. The booster clubs themselves are examples of this carefully cultivated mediocrity. Lewis describes the Boosters' Club itself as "a weekly lunch-club, local chapter of a national organization which promoted sound

business and friendliness among Regular Fellows” (*Babbitt* 50). The fact that it is a branch of a national club speaks to the care such “Regular Fellows” take to be as averagely American as they can manage while stating that their goal is to boost themselves up to some undefined height. The word ‘zenith’ means the highest point of something, often of a celestial body, but if all points are at the same height, as the people of Zenith seem to strive to be, perhaps any one of them can be the zenith as they are all the same. In a nation as focused on being uniform as Lewis suggests America is, Zenith is the zenith as much as any other city could be. The name suggests that there is no way to break out of the mold, that Zenith is simultaneously the highest point that can be reached and the lowest all at once. No change can happen; no such change exists.

By the end of *Main Street* it becomes clear that Gopher Prairie’s resistance to change is not merely passive. It forces its will upon its citizens. Carol arrives in the town determined to make it more sophisticated and cultured, but by the end of the book she gives up, and her plans are reduced to those “in name only.” She admits to her defeat and she then goes on to say to herself that she has won in that “I’ve never excused my failures by sneering at my aspirations...I do not admit that Main Street is as beautiful as it should be! I do not admit that Gopher Prairie is greater or more generous than Europe!” (*Main Street* 432). For all her brave words, however, the fact remains that she returned with Will to Gopher Prairie, and if she does not think it is the greatest place in the world, it still cannot be denied that she is willing to live there, and that she has become more like the others in the town, gossiping or putting aside intellectual pastimes for activities

they favor (a page before she agreed that she would be happy to go to the movies with friends rather than to sit home and read). The illness she feared earlier in the book, the ‘village sickness’ takes hold of her and the mindset of Gopher Prairie.

If there is any question that such attitudes are capable of overtaking a person completely then Lewis dispels them firmly in *Dodsworth*, when Dodsworth goes to a bachelor dinner held by an American friend while he is in England. The dinner is full of American expatriates. Lewis writes “in all of them was a hint of American heartiness” (*Dodsworth* 89). It is as if the entire nation infects people with the village sickness and once contracted it cannot be cured even if a person then leaves the nation. To drive this point home Lewis describes one man, “Nutthal of the Anglo-Peruvian Bank – he was Lancashire born but he had lived in Omaha for eighteen years and he was three hundred per cent. American” (*Dodsworth* 89). By defining this man who was not born in the United States as American Lewis suggests that Americanness is a disease which can infect even those who are not naturally predisposed to it and that it is possible for ‘Americanness’ to be the defining trait of a person.

The nature of that Americanness is a theme in all four of the novels discussed here. The village sickness is highly contagious. Just as there are more Gopher Prairies than Chicagos, this sickness is about more than merely Gopher Prairie’s unwillingness to change to suit Carol. In reading *Main Street*, *Dodsworth*, *Babbitt*, and *It Can’t Happen Here* the sameness of the characters and the places described becomes striking. This is true despite the fact that the novels range in publication date from *Main Street*, 1920, to 1935, *It Can’t Happen Here*,

a fifteen-year period which saw a shift from the onset of the “Roaring Twenties” to the middle of the Great Depression. Even if the first three novels, all published before the stock market crashed, might be expected to portray a similar America, *It Can’t Happen Here* was not, and yet it would be difficult to argue that the patriotism that leads the American public to follow Berzelius Windrip bears no connection to the intensity with which Babbitt supports and boasts about his home city of Zenith. Similarly, the reluctance to go against popular opinion, the intensity of the push to conform is as clear in Emil Staubmeyer’s statement to Doremus that what he is doing is because of “Just orders – you know – just orders” (*It Can’t Happen Here* 221) as he helps cart off Doremus’s books all of which are on the banned list. This is akin to the moment when Lewis writes of Babbitt, “the priests of the Presbyterian Church determined his every religious belief and the senators who controlled the Republican Party decided ... in Washington what he should think about disarmament, tariff, and Germany” (*Babbitt* 88). In both cases individuals give up independent choices and responsibility in favor of following the dictates of large political powers. And yet despite the fact that these similarities are clear, in his introduction to *It Can’t Happen Here*, Michael Meyer states that in the novel Lewis had to look farther afield than the “middle class predispositions to be foolish and venal” (Meyer vi) in order to satisfy readers in an America where the middle class was disappearing into the Great Depression. In fact, it seems rather like what Lewis actually did was to take his concerns about the state of the country (and Huey Long) and write about precisely the same sorts of people as he had before – those who bristled at

outside interference and attempts to change them. The underlying fury which Windrip's government plays to in banning books seen as dangerous is the public conviction that these authors thought they were superior to average "folk." The clannish protection only of those deemed like oneself remains as important to Doremus and his peers as they are to Babbitt, Carol and Will Kennicott, and Sam Dodsworth.

This suggests that in his mind Americans had not, at their cores, changed, even if their circumstances had. The resistance to change is a theme of criticism not only in *Main Street* where Gopher Prairie is so set in its ways that Carol eventually finds herself giving up on her visions of transforming the town. At the end of *Babbitt*, George Babbitt tells his son that for all that "the way the cards are stacked against a young fellow to-day, I can't say I approve of early marriages" (*Babbitt* 373) but, nonetheless, he does not object too strongly to Ted's elopement. He gives a rousing speech about how "I've never done a single thing I've wanted to in my whole life" (*Babbitt* 374) and so he will support Ted. The book ends with the two of them marching together into the room where their family and the family of Ted's new wife are in solidarity. One interpretation suggests that some change has taken place, as if Babbitt has moved from insisting that Ted get a college degree to giving him carte blanche to do as he wishes. It might appear that Babbitt has shaken off of the old ways and embraced the new. Yet Babbitt had ample opportunity to do precisely that for himself and he did not. Babbitt spent time partying with Tanis and her friends and experiencing a little bit of the roar of the twenties, but ultimately he pushes her away, telling her "gosh, I

can't go on this way" (*Babbitt* 343). When he says those words he thinks he is referring to wanting to get away from one of the numerous pulls on his attention, but his constant worry about Tanis shows that breaking the pattern of action and of being a 'Good Fellow' by having an affair and being friendly with her friends makes him "jumpy and nervous and cranky" (*Babbitt* 337) in his own words. Lewis portrays Babbitt as being the fundamental American and simultaneously unable to ever really change.

The same pattern can be seen in *Dodsworth*, where Sam, after much agonizing and going so far as to get on a ship and sail all the way back to America turns himself right around, leaves Fran, and returns to Europe -- a place he spent half the book trying to escape -- to be with Edith Cortright. At first it seems, as it did when Carol escaped Gopher Prairie and went to work in Washington D.C., that Sam has actually changed. The last line of the book, however, shows that just like Lewis' other Americans Samuel Dodsworth can never escape his past or his past self. After finding himself contented with Edith and discovering happiness and youth in her laughter the last line of the novel belies all of that, stating "He was, indeed, so confidently happy that he completely forgot Fran and he did not again yearn over her, for almost two days" (*Dodsworth* 360). The inescapability of the past seems to be one of the most defining characteristics of Lewis' Americans.

This inescapability takes a dark turn in *It Can't Happen Here*, where Lewis suggests that there is no way for events to have occurred other than as they do. Buzz Windrip's success lies in large part in being "a Professional Common

Man” (*It Can’t Happen Here* 72) a goal that without context one could as easily ascribe to Babbitt or Will Kennicott. Windrip merely magnifies his Common Man-ness beyond that of other Common Men, apparently the natural conclusion of such people as Babbitt. And the militarized thugs who follow Windrip are no different. When the Minute Men are first formed Doremus is already nervous about their presence, writing “uneasy news reports” (*It Can’t Happen Here* 93) about this new army for Windrip. However the stage for the MMs can reasonably be said to have been set by such organizations as the booster clubs so prevalent in Zenith. Such organization to promote welfare were common enough, and glorified the nation and its supporters such that the Minute Men organization might very well not seem so unreasonable to the public. The glorifying of America’s might is familiar in the response of the people of Gopher Prairie to their men going off to the first world war, and the Minute Men build upon precisely those ideas. Lewis states that “Their uniform suggested the pioneer America of Cold Harbor and of the Indian fighters under Miles and Custer” (*It Can’t Happen Here* 93) giving the reader an idea of the revival of some sort of ‘lost American glory’ which the Minute Men are generously and bravely reclaiming for the nation. This kind of imagery is clearly designed to stir patriotism and unite Americans.

Those “uneasy news reports” are important in part because they are so carelessly ignored. The idea of journalism as the fourth branch of the United States Government alongside the traditional executive, legislative, and judicial branches, or as the ‘fourth estate’ is one that can fail in many ways. Perhaps journalists fail to be properly cautious, perhaps they miss the important stories, or

perhaps the people do not read their news, or do not listen to it, or do not care. If that fourth branch of government is as necessary as people often claim to think it is in order to hold in check the mistakes of the official branches, then that breakdown is disastrous. And of course that is precisely what happens in the story. Warnings from journalists like Doremus are ignored and later they are silenced, just as Windrip's government silences historical voices by confiscating books deemed unacceptable. The importance of the fourth estate in Lewis' mind and its duty to provide the people with the truth is made still clearer in the actions of the New Underground, the resistance to the totalitarian government. Their primary activity, at least for Doremus's section, is distributing pamphlets, and the language that describes this is telling. In his co-conspirators Doremus finds "the religious passion he had missed in the churches; and if altars, if windows of many-colored glass, had never been peculiarly holy to him, he understood them now as he gloated over such sacred trash as scarred type and a creaking hand press" (*It Can't Happen Here* 259). Lewis places the job of the press in keeping a nation honest and good on the level of religion, making the truth into a sacred duty. And well he might; it seems clear as the novel progresses that the only chance the nation has of escaping its new rulers is that the carefully crafted unity of the MMs and their propaganda will fall to the truth spread carefully by the New Underground.

It is important that, from the beginning, that unity espoused by Windrip and his Minute Men is quite explicitly not meant for everyone. The symbol of the MMs "was a five-pointed star, because the star on the American flag was five

pointed, whereas the stars of both the Soviet banner and the Jews—the shield of David—were six-pointed” (*It Can’t Happen Here* 93). This means that the Minute Men organization is, from the beginning, explicitly barred to some people and by specifying that the stars on the flag are also five-pointed Jews and Soviets are conveniently excluded from the nation as well as from the organization itself. (The fact that the Soviet flag does in reality have a five-pointed star is relatively unimportant given that the purpose of the five-pointed star was exclusionary.) This affirms people’s tendencies to protect those who “belong” at the intentional expense of those who do not that is also so clearly seen in the people of Gopher Prairie and Zenith. In fact, it is such a natural-seeming progression from those ideas that it would not be hard to believe that even without impetus from Windrip’s campaign just such an organization might well have formed on its own.

In *It Can’t Happen Here* each step seems a natural progression not only from the previous events of the book, but also from the ideas Lewis has previously explored in his earlier works. The result is that it begins to seem that Lewis believes events like those of *It Can’t Happen Here* to be virtually inevitable unless people actively take steps to stop them. Moreover, he has no real suggestions on how the nation might dig itself out of such a hole. When the novel ends Doremus, having escaped a concentration camp, is working with the resistance. He has seen people shot in front of him for small crimes. There seems to be intermittent work towards bringing down the tyrannical government, but never any real progress. Doremus finds out that a group of Corps is out after him, and he departs to hide in the forest and lie low. The final line of the book is

“And still Doremus goes on in the red sunrise, for a Doremus Jessup can never die” (*It Can't Happen Here* 381). The difficulty is that true as that may be, everlasting as the hardheaded Doremuses who find themselves caught up in such events are, it is not clear that they can ever succeed. It is not entirely obvious what the goal of Doremus Jessup is – does he want to return to running his paper? Does he want justice at any cost including the loss of that paper? Does he want to return to a world where he had power over the likes of Shad Ledue instead of having to obey them as he did once Ledue became a corpo? Does he simply want a return to democracy? Regardless of what that goal might be, Lewis robs the reader of its satisfaction. The end of the book does not simply fail to answer any questions a reader might have about what Doremus wants. It does not just refuse to allow any gladness at the overthrow of a terrible government or at any real success. The last line, stating that “a Doremus Jessup can never die” robs the reader of any hope that such an end can ever be reached.

This hopelessness does not confine itself merely to the fictional world of the book either. Many of Lewis' earlier works included characters and ideas based on the events of his own life. Carol Kennicott had her roots in his wife, Grace, during the early happy period of their marriage, and “Lewis and Grace also went calling about town and Lewis saw how provincial the village seemed to her” (Hutchisson 17) and Fran Dodsworth was similarly inspired by Grace after their marriage went sour and the Dodsworths travels in Europe by a trip the two took (Hutchisson 173). It is the same traits of clannishness and unquestioning patriotism that exist in those earlier works that pave the path for the events of *It*

Can't Happen Here as discussed above. Given this, it would seem that Lewis provides his readers with a very dark idea of what America itself is and the path it will go down, apparently inevitably. Lewis' portrayal of Americanness seems highly self destructive and even fatalistic.

It might be easy to conclude from this that in Lewis' opinion Americanness is wholly bad. His portrayal of Americans is often highly negative, and in showing that Sam feels stupid often in Europe it is not hard to imagine that Lewis saw Europe as superior. In *Dodsworth*, Braut, a European, lectures the Dodsworths on Europeans and Americans. When he says "America wants to turn us into Good Fellows, all provided with the very best automobiles – and no private place which we can go in them" (*Dodsworth* 240) readers are inclined to nod along with him, and all the more inclined if they have read *Babbitt*, where the titular character is meant to epitomize the 'Good Fellow' and to be a less than flattering portrait of that American archetype. And yet Sam himself is a sympathetic character in a way that Babbitt is not. Badgered by a wife who denies doing it, Sam is worthy of the reader's pity. We root for his life with Edith. He is clearly a character who is sympathetic even if he is not an ideal person. If Sam's American world is all there is, then Lewis pities America and its inability to escape itself and he tells this story over and over again.

More than that, Braut's lecture explores some of the fundamentals about Lewis' opinions on Europe and America. By giving several pages to it, Lewis highlights the importance of Braut's ideas. He is so amiable and so knowledgeable and he carries authority with his words. When Braut says that in

contrast to America and Soviet Russia “Europe, she believes that a Voltaire, a Beethoven, a Wagner, a Keats, a Leuwenhoeck, a Flaubert, give drama and meaning to life, and that they are worth preserving” (*Dodsworth* 241) the parallels to Brooks’ lamentations that America cares too little for literature are difficult to miss. Lewis, like his character Braut, perhaps sees America as being a nation too disinterested in culture, an idea carried out to the fullest in *It Can’t Happen Here* as Americans go about destroying books and anything else that functions as a symbol of culture.

When Braut describes America as obsessed with buying and money the reader has already been told that America cares insufficiently for the arts and culture. When he goes on to explain that he truly does not mean to be too terribly hard on America, it seems that Braut is using the words ‘America’ and ‘Americanization’ in a rather unusual fashion. He tells his audience “I quite understand that the mystic process of ‘Americanization’ is being carried on as much by German industrialists and French exporters and English advertising-men as it is by born Yankees!” (*Dodsworth* 241). This is to say he is using “American” to mean people who are not, in point of fact, American at all, having been born elsewhere and having never been to America, but rather to describe a sensibility. This sensibility may be intended as merely an extension of the ‘village sickness’ idea from *Main Street*, but if it is then he is using it in ways that seem too broad. After all, such commercialization and industrialization did not begin with Americans. The Industrial Revolution had its roots in England.

It should be noted that in 1927 Lewis left America for a trip of undecided length (Hutchisson 159) and some of the events of *Dodsworth*, particularly the love story between Sam and Edith mirror some of his own experiences. Instead of lending the novel more immediacy in some minds including Hutchisson's the characters and events end up falling flat, lacking the usual clarity of purpose found in so many of his books. Hutchisson sees the novel as having become about love and marriage rather than about a captain of industry to be a counterpart to *Babbitt*, and argues that this shift is based in large part on the fact that the character of Sam Dodsworth was insufficiently formed in Lewis' mind. The shift went from a satirization of Sam himself to encouraging the reader to identify with him as Sam's story came to parallel Lewis' own, resulting in a character filled with contradictions. Hutchisson moves on from these observations to consider the changes made to Fran's character, and states that "he also shifted his concerns from Sam's loss of identity and his 'yearning' after what he has missed in life to the incompatibility of Fran and Sam" (Hutchisson 182). Despite this, in writing about the problems of the marriage Lewis does indeed explore Sam's struggles of identity. When Sam listens to Braut's lecture at the party and responds the words he says and thoughts and feelings he expresses are just as important as the way he and Fran interact around the events. Sam is the main character, and the reader is naturally concerned with his concerns and ideas. Lewis' skill in writing characters who cause the reader to think about things the way they do makes it seem unlikely that Lewis truly expects the readers to utterly ignore Sam's ideas about America or about Europe and so it is safe to conclude that what Sam says to Braut is at

least somewhat intentional; it is not merely filler so that Fran can try to warn Sam off from speaking only to be ignored. It has substance of its own.

The substance of Sam's rebuttal is an impassioned plea in defense of America and a firm argument that Europe's ideas about America are not only wrong, but backwards. When he tells Braut that Europe continues to base its ideas about America on old books, and those which quite possibly were wrong when they were written he stakes a claim for an American identity that has value beyond Europe's vision of the young nation. These ideas were alive with Dickens' '*Martin Chuzzlewit*,' a story which Sam points out describes Americans who are ignorant and uncivilized at a time when "a fellow named Abe Lincoln and another named Grant were living there; and not more than maybe ten years later, a boy called William Dean Howells...had been born" (*Dodsworth* 243). By responding with the names of great Americans Sam not only replies to the backwards books Europe continues to look to to understand America, he poses a challenge to Braut's laundry list of names of great European artists and turns the idea that Americans are backward on its head by saying that it is Europe that is stuck in the past. Given the sympathy which the narrative gives Sam, these words can be taken not as simply the defensive rambling of a man who does not know how truly unsophisticated he is but instead as a testimony of belief and an attempt to fight the idea that America is in fact entirely irredeemable. Lewis, via Sam, seems to believe that America is worthy and at least somewhat good after all.

The question then is what it is that America should be worthy of and where does it fail to shine? It seems clear from Lewis' earlier works, including

Main Street and *Babbitt*, that part of this lies in America's closed mind, which, when put in the context of the intersection between Sam and Braut seems to be in direct contradiction to the best that America might be. He insists that "We love to make money, but we love to spend it" (*Dodsworth* 242) and brings up Lincoln, Grant, and Howells. In doing so he presents the best aspects of America as being excitement and action -- in purchasing as well as in earning -- and the ideals of freedom so often brought up when discussing Lincoln and Grant. More than that, when he refers to Howells, Sam reminds both Braut and the reader that America does indeed have a literary tradition, for all that it might be shorter than Europe's, and that Europe itself has decreed at least some of that literature worthwhile given that "I notice they still read his book about Venice IN Venice" (*Dodsworth* 243). This exchange suggests that what America needs to be worthy of is being considered a 'good' culture and one which stands on its own two feet, and that it has, in Sam's voice, a worthy hero.

The way in which America has achieved value as Lewis sees it is as important as the value itself. Sam speaks of an American drive to discover and understand new things, insisting that most Americans come to Europe "as meekly as schoolboys, to admire, to learn!" (*Dodsworth* 242). He reinforces this statement by arguing that that the useless people Dickens describes could not have taken the rough wilderness of America Dickens also speaks of and turned it so quickly into a powerful civilization complete with paved roads. His point is primarily that Americans were not nearly as useless as people like Dickens believed at the time, but his acknowledgement that the America of the time was far different and

wilder than his own also emphasizes the ability of the American people to change the world around them and to progress at great speed. All of this ability to make progress serves the purpose of achieving progress where progress is defined in a way that would suit Brooks quite well. Brooks lamented America's lack of any culture like that of Europe, and it seems that the European model is what Dodsworth puts forward as America's proper goal. He tells Braut that the kind of aristocratic pride of Europe is good, and that "I want to see just that kind of pride in America" (*Dodsworth* 243). Then he goes on and makes a statement about that pride which seems to encapsulate much of the difficulty Lewis seems to have with American identity, suggesting that "Maybe we've gone too fast to get it" (*Dodsworth* 243). The key to this statement is the sense, present not only in *Dodsworth*, but in *Main Street* and *Babbitt* as well, that American identity is not quite real, that it is instead a façade constructed out of an idea of what people should be rather than what they actually are. In this passage of *Dodsworth* it becomes clear that the difficulty of culture that Lewis has been building from *Main Street* forward is a battle between America and Europe, where Americans cannot decide if they want to leave behind European ideals or chase them.

Braut's arguments against America, in contrast, come from a place of confidence, encapsulated in a statement he makes about Europeans. "The European, the aristocrat, feels that he is responsible to past generations to carry on the culture they have formed" (*Dodsworth* 240). This statement is heavy with the weight of the past, and comes with the comfort of knowing precisely who one is. This tradition provides a source for all of European culture and is directly

contrasted with Sam's own statement in his rebuttal that Americans have progressed greatly in the past hundred years. This is the fast progress he speaks of, and the result is that American culture, by its very nature, maybe cannot be a real 'tradition', because tradition is based on the past and must be built over time. Instead American culture perches precariously, made up of a cobbled-together idea of what it should be rather than of what it has been. It is obviously and unavoidably created rather than simply present and as a result it is uncomfortable and questionable, as made clear by the questions the novel asks. The Europeans Sam and Fran encounter are confident of their own positions -- which is something which Sam often resents -- while Sam finds that without automobiles he is uncertain of who he actually is.

These kinds of questions about identity are central to many of Lewis' novels. The pattern of his writing tends to follow a character who attempts to find his or her place in the world, meeting with various hurdles along the way. The answers to that question are unsatisfactory at the least and sometimes are upsetting because Lewis' conclusions about the American people are somewhat muddled. Carol Kennicott's search for her own identity leads her to Washington at one point, but in the end it leads her back to Gopher Prairie and the life she spends most of the book fighting. That life is generally less defined than it might be to begin with and Carol's own complicated path to it does not help matters. The people of Gopher Prairie want to at least some extent to be modern and part of the America that is emerging in urban centers. The way Will speaks to Carol about the town when he is wooing her makes this clear. He talks about how he

prefers it to the big city because in Gopher Prairie he feels like he can make a difference while in St. Paul he is just one man among so many that he himself is just a drop in the bucket, but then goes on to say “Bresnahan—you know—the famous auto manufacturer—he comes from Gopher Prairie” (*Main Street* 19). The fact that he cares about outside recognition and the fact that Bresnahan’s work in the auto industry places him firmly in the set of modern people building modern machines sets out the fundamental complexity of Gopher Prairie’s relationship with itself and the world quite neatly. But Bresnahan left Gopher Prairie. The town does not want to give up its sense of itself as a small town filled with small town people and good neighbors who care about each other (how they care seems up for debate by the end of the novel, but that seems likely to be how they would characterize themselves) but at the same time they do consider their town to be intrinsically a part of the United States and with their pride in that fact comes the sense that they do want to have some sort of connection to the rest of the country. To this end they attempt to perform modernity, which can be seen especially clearly in the short lived booster campaign. Carol asks Harry and Juanita Haydock if the town will be keeping it up after having been away for a while and they tell her “Well, we’ve dropped it just temporarily, but—sure you bet! (*Main Street* 414). The desire to be modern is there, as is the desire to be impressive to those outside of Gopher Prairie, but it is always at odds with the inertia of a small town.

That inertia carries through the other novels combined with the attachment to those seen as ‘us’ and distrust of those seen as ‘them’ and it is what makes Carol so uncomfortable in Gopher Prairie. In his earlier books Lewis satirizes

these traits, in *Dodsworth* he both satirizes them and praises those things he thinks America has managed to do right, and in *It Can't Happen Here* he not only satirizes what he sees as the worst of American culture, he violently condemns it. In *Babbitt* Lewis suggests that the ideals of 'Good-Fellowship,' patriotism, protecting your own, and being a good, upstanding member of the community can cause an individual to be unfulfilled, dull, and unable to think for themselves. In *It Can't Happen Here* he warns that these traits have the potential to lead to dictatorship and the loss of freedoms. This conclusion is certainly not one he reached without looking at the world around him, as fascism rose in Europe and America found itself with a complex political landscape. His wife, Dorothy Thompson, was a reporter, and she was very strongly anti-Nazi, which came out in her own writing, and certainly influenced him. Her interview with Huey Long, a man who at the time seemed to be a third-party candidate for president with a very good chance of beating out the main party candidates including the incumbent Franklin Delano Roosevelt likely helped him in planning the novel, as Berzelius Windrip, who wins the presidency in it is a Huey Long figure (Lingeman 400). The idea that a Buzz Windrip, whether that man was Huey Long or someone else, might win the presidency was not a far off theoretical, but instead a reality that Lewis found highly alarming and entirely possible. As a result it would be foolish to say that when Lewis wrote his warning novel that his fears were unfounded or entirely speculative. Despite this, for all that the election of a man like Windrip was possible in the real world, the way Lewis imagines him

getting to that point and the way such a path builds upon Lewis' previous conception of America and the American public is more questionable.

In *Main Street*, when Vida says that there are more Gopher Prairies than Chicagos she is trying to convince Carol that the Gopher Prairies of America are the real America, and that they are the reality of most people, even if Carol does not want them to be. Given the way Carol's character was influenced by Lewis' wife, Grace, and by her presence in his hometown of Sauk Centre and her difficulty with the atmosphere of a small town it is clear that Lewis was exploring situations he understood personally. One anecdote from their time there sheds some light on Lewis' thoughts not only about his wife and Carol Kennicott, but also about different people in America. One morning when Grace was indisposed and Lewis brought her breakfast in bed his father complained that if she could eat then she ought to do so with the family. The incident itself is less interesting than Grace's description of Lewis' reaction. Apparently Lewis suddenly saw his family in a very different light than had done previously, and through the lens of New York he was upset by his father's rudeness (Hutchisson 17). Lewis was probably right that there are more Gopher Prairies than Chicagos, and accordingly, there are more Sauk Centres than there are New Yorks. Despite this, the reader might wonder how Lewis could conclude from there that the Gopher Prairies and Sauk Centres were the only true America and that their people were the definition of American identity. After all, he himself had different ideas as did Grace.

That is possibly the strangest thing about all of Lewis' disapproval of the American identity he describes. It is strange enough when Brooks writes as if there are no worthwhile writers in the United States despite the fact that he presumably considered himself to be at least passable, but Lewis thinks that there are in fact Americans who are brilliant and people in America who do not fit the Main Street standard he describes in his novels. He just thinks they do not count. Returning to the passage where Sam Dodsworth and Braut discuss the differences between America and Europe, where Lewis so explicitly defines what America is and who Americans are, the reader cannot help but compare Sam's praise of American greats with a statement made by Braut a little earlier. Having aggressively attacked the failings of Americans compared to Europeans Braut recants slightly. He declares "There are a few people born in America who DO belong to what I call 'Europeans'...But wherever they were born, there is this definite class, standing for a definite aristocratic culture" (*Dodsworth* 241). This is to say that those people who fall into this category are not actually American, which would seem to make it impossible for America to ever be anything but what it is if any time someone does step outside of the box Lewis simply declares them not American at all.

If the only place in Lewis' writing where such an idea appeared was in Braut's lecture it might be reasonable to suggest that Lewis intended the statement to be read as Braut insulting America without understanding it. However this idea that people outside of the definition of 'American' Lewis has come up with, whether because they are from a city instead of a small town or because they or

their parents immigrated, are not really American shows up repeatedly. In *Main Street* immigrants live separately from ‘Americans’, although, as always, it must be remembered that the only real natives are American Indians. When Carol speaks to Miles Bjornstam, a radical disliked by much of the town, and certainly looked down upon as being part of the lower classes, she finds that his ideas are quite different from those of the people she is meant to be associating with -- those whose Americanness is never questioned. He is referred to as the “Red Swede” and in that name alone it is made clear that he does not really belong to ‘America,’ at least not the America of Gopher Prairie. When he leaves town after the death of his wife and child, it only reinforces the idea that he is not a real American, both because of his nationality and because of his ideas. Given the fact that the modern America was increasingly populated with people newly arrived, it seems counter-intuitive to declare that none of them count at all.

Nationality and questions about Americanness always seem to come up when talking about anyone who fails to be perfectly white, Anglo-Saxon, protestant, and politically timid or conservative. The maids in Gopher Prairie are referred to by their nation of origin, it is noted in *Babbitt* when the girl Babbitt flirts with has an ‘ethnic’ eastern European name, and in *It Can’t Happen Here* the attitudes of the people of the nation, like those of *Main Street*’s denizens, carry that refusal to admit as American anyone they disagree with to its extreme, sending dissenters, Communists, Jews, and others they considered unsatisfactory to concentration camps. In one of his last novels, *Kingsblood Royal*, Lewis addresses race in the form of a man who assumes he is white until he learns that a

small fraction of his heritage is black, and finds that the people around him treat him differently making it clear that Lewis believes that the portion of the American public he has declared to be the center of the culture is entirely unwilling to consider as truly American anyone who does not fit their standards. It would seem that as a result Lewis concludes that this means they are right, and that people outside of those boundaries are not actually American, but it still is not obvious why.

The reality is that Lewis knew that America was not uniform. “Red” Lewis was not like the other members of his his family, yet they all managed to live in the same country. But, again and again Lewis created characters who are not clannish or narrow-minded, and he created narratives that encourage fresh ideas, that push Americans outside of the restricting boundaries of identity. It seems that for Lewis the appeal of a single American identity is so strong that even an objectionable identity is better than an unarticulated alternative. Lewis appears resigned to the status quo even as the satirical nature of his work suggests that a part of him is also trying to change it. As Carol, Babbitt, Sam, and even Doremus demonstrate, Lewis’ work fails to realize that the people who do fit the pattern of Gopher Prairie identity, like the solid Will Kennicott, have no more right to define the young country than anyone else. In seeking a single true identity Lewis stumbles and describes one that leaves out as much of America as it includes.

HERMAN MELVILLE

Herman Melville's stories about America contain both similarities and striking differences from those of Sinclair Lewis. Some of this especially can be accounted for by the fact that when Melville wrote, America was still a very young nation. It is obvious that the gadgets that so captivated George Babbitt would have been unimaginable to Ishmael. Nonetheless, the portraits of America the two novelists present are different in ways that are not accounted for by time alone. Where Lewis' novels portray life in small towns and in suburbs, Melville's *Moby Dick*, *Bartleby the Scrivener*, and *Benito Cereno* take place either at sea or in large cities. Lewis' writing contradicts itself in its attempts to define American identity, but Melville offers a more consistent set of definitions. Despite that, American stories that so often turn seaward or to the East, when so much of the nation was focused on westward expansion, cannot be said to be representative of the entire nation, even if Melville addresses questions of identity just as Lewis did.

Melville unquestionably was concerned with identity. In his stories, characters define themselves and their identities in ways that are indicative of the larger nature of America. The opening line of *Moby Dick*, "Call me Ishmael" is famous for its brevity and resonance, and for the fact that the narrator does not say that his name is Ishmael; simply that Ishmael is what the reader should call him.

The reader has only his request, and while it may raise questions about his veracity and his reliability as a narrator, the first line has another effect: Ishmael is instantly in control of his story and in control of this version of himself.

Ishmael is our guide. We see the world through his eyes and his voice. The manner through which he introduces himself suggests that Ishmael is both a character and a symbol or metaphor. Aside from the way the narrative introduces his name, the name itself should call to mind the son Abraham had with Sarah's handmaiden, Hagar. Perhaps the story of the well that sprung up in the desert to save the lives of both Hagar and her son, Ishmael, when Abraham threw them out into the desert at Sarah's request captured Melville's imagination when he read it in the Bible. The story reminds the reader of the necessity of water, an obsession that captivates the Ishmael of Melville's narrative as well as it might have done the thirsty boy of the Bible. Ishmael becomes a symbol of the power of water that so entranced Melville, while at the same time representing the figure of the outcast or orphan who loses his father. If Ishmael represents an American perspective, the lost father is Britain while the mother who gives him life is the sea. Accordingly, *Moby Dick* begins with Ishmael pondering the ocean and the power of water over mankind. As he sees it, water is magnetic and inlanders "come from lanes and alleys, streets and avenues—north, east, south, and west" (*Moby Dick* 15) to be united at the ocean. That uniting of people stretches beyond mere place of origin, connecting people across time as well as place as Ishmael goes from speaking about people from different parts of the country, feeling the pull of the ocean, to the suggestion that every boy wants at some point to go to

sea, a more global perspective. He asks about other parts of the world and other times:

Why did the old Persians hold the sea holy? Why did the Greeks give it a separate deity, and own brother of Jove? Surely all this is not without meaning. And still deeper the meaning of that story of Narcissus, who because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned. But that same image we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all." (*Moby Dick* 15-16)

This passage reveals some of Melville's own obsession with the ocean and suggests that in his mind, as in Ishmael's, water was one of the cores of humanity. If enough time was spent understanding it then a window to what humanity was could be opened using, presumably, "the key to it all."

The focus of this passage on the wider world might be seen as suggesting that such a key is universal rather than being particular in any way to America. Nonetheless, there is a specific air to the questions that could only be American for Americans seem to have something of an obsession with learning the origins of things, their reasons for existing, and their essence. Melville's conception of water as the key of all human life makes it clear that his obsession with the sea comes from this source just as much as Lewis' obsession with figuring out American identity did. Moreover, in *Moby Dick* the reader can see the aspect of this search for meanings and origins that specifically requires searchers to do their own explorations. This notion was fundamental to the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson, who was certainly one of the first American writers to work towards creating a uniquely American literature and, indeed, an American philosophy. In 1836, less than twenty years before *Moby Dick* was published, Emerson wrote an

essay entitled “Nature” which begins by lamenting the ‘retrospective’ nature of the age which he believes focuses too much on the knowledge and ideas of the past and asking “Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?” (Emerson 35). It is a question the reader understands not merely in the contexts of the age of Enlightenment or the general state of the world in 1836, but also as a clarification of Emerson’s ways of thinking about the young nation. Such an insistence that personal experience of the world is the only way to truly understand it can be seen as the same spirit present in Ishmael’s introduction of his story. The fact that his narrative is almost entirely from his perspective and that he has control over that perspective is the first thing the reader learns about him.

The American desire to observe the world for one’s self is evident in the character of Ishmael who, although he has been a sailor before, has never gone on a whaling voyage. He admits that his primary motive for choosing to go whaling is “the overwhelming idea of the great whale himself” (*Moby Dick* 18). The idea of such a creature captured his curiosity. It is likely that Ishmael had heard stories about whaling voyages prior to the voyage of the Pequod, which explains the extraordinary cetology of the novel. But reading about a whaling voyage is not living it, and in a fashion we might call Emersonian, Ishmael wishes to experience it for himself. He even tells us he was fated to do so, or caused to do so by Providence, which created events that cajoled him “into the delusion that it was a choice resulting from my own unbiased free will and discriminating judgment” (*Moby Dick* 18) because it feels so obvious to him that it is the correct path. There

is nothing particularly religious about Ishmael's character; his choices appear to be his own. Higher power at work or not, we can be assured that no other person has forced Ishmael to take the voyage. He says, "I am tormented with an everlasting itch for things remote. I love to sail forbidden seas and land on barbarous coasts" (*Moby Dick* 18) making it clear that his love for the sea, for adventure, and for personal experience is intrinsic to his sense of self. It suggests that such a guide as may exist is nonetheless part of the essence of Ishmael himself, if perhaps within a construct where it is suggested that the concept of 'himself' is affected by outside forces. Ultimately, it is clear that Ishmael seeks for some sort of truth of human existence in going to sea, a truth he does not believe he can find in others' tales, although within the conceit of the story, that the one telling it is Ishmael, he gives no concern to the possibility that a reader might be as unable to gain that understanding from his narrative as he is unenlightened by the stories of other sailors.

In this it seems that Ishmael and Melville have something in common. A few days into 1841 Melville himself embarked upon a whaling expedition (Delbanco 37). His experiences in his time at sea and in the places he found himself were vital to much of his later writing, including, of course, *Moby Dick*. As he worked on *Moby Dick* Melville studied the portrayals of the ocean and of whaling created by others and repeatedly found them wanting, saying of one that it had plenty of facts he found to be untrue but nothing of the real spirit and reality of the ocean (Delbanco 123). Like Emerson, he considered the understanding of a

thing afforded by reading about another's experience of it to be insufficient in the face of direct personal experience.

In considering his conception of the sea as holding some key to the secrets of the world, one cannot help but see some of that sense of mysticism in a description of Toby Greene, a friend with whom Melville deserted on his first sailing voyage. According to Melville in *Typee* Greene was "one of that class of rovers you sometimes meet at sea, who never reveal their origin, never allude to home, and go rambling over the world as if pursued by some mysterious fate they cannot possibly elude" (Delbanco 42-43, *Typee* 32). Such a description could be read as not only a description of Greene, but also a description of America as it saw itself – without a past to speak of, and with a grand destiny, a word that should, in this case, bring to mind the phrase 'manifest destiny.' The concept of manifest destiny as the idea that white Americans were meant to settle the North American continent is a familiar one, but just as important is the fact that this idea extended, to a degree, to the oceans as well, particularly with regard to the whaling industry. This is perhaps unsurprising given that in order to reach the continent where the American nation was founded Europeans first had to cross the ocean, so that when America saw itself as a nation of new ideas and new truths those ideas and truths had been found by going to sea. The result is that for America the sea held a promise of hope and knowledge, as it had imparted both to the first European settlers. Additionally, because the ocean was, at that time, first and foremost the domain of the British (who had been regarded as a superior naval power since their defeat of the Spanish Armada during the reign of

Elizabeth I), America's confidence with the ocean and certainty that the nation would be a naval power was a direct challenge to their former rulers.

The Pacific Ocean was seen as another west, beyond the west of the continent itself, where American exploration was a tempting adventure just as it was on land (Delbanco 37). Moreover, Melville saw the sea and whaling as particularly American domains. In *Moby Dick* when discussing whaling Ishmael states "Yankees in one day, collectively, kill more whales than all the English, collectively, in ten years" (*Moby Dick* 198). Delbanco explains that while this claim is exaggerated, two thirds of the whaling vessels in the world at the time were American, so while Melville's statement does take on an air of boasting hyperbole its spirit is not so incorrect.

That boasting is interesting however. Melville's focus on the ocean connects to his American identity and pride in America's dominance in the field. Such emphasis on American skill at sea over the skill of the peoples of other nations is more pronounced in "Benito Cereno", a short story in Melville's *The Piazza Tales*. The captain of an American ship, Captain Delano, interacts with Benito Cereno, the captain of a Spanish slave ship from Latin America. Delano comes off as decidedly more competent than the Spanish captain and crew, rescuing Cereno from a mutiny of African slaves. This aim of promoting America can be seen in Delano's success. When *Moby Dick* was published, the nation was not yet quite seventy-five years old and whaling was "the first international industry dominated by the United States" (Delbanco 40). The advocacy for first-hand experience by both Melville and Emerson in their obsession with

understanding the world makes a great deal of sense in this context. Here was a nation that, as a result of its relative youth, had little historical precedent of its own even for those inclined toward learning by reading about the experiences of others. If a national tradition is absent, then perhaps the natural response is to declare it unnecessary and to then focus on those fields, like whaling, where the nation had proven itself.

Benito Cereno presents a situation where an American ship and a Spanish one interact, allowing direct comparison between the people of the two nations. In this comparison, the Americans, led by Captain Delano, are superior, and the cultural differences favor the Americans who appear to be more successful than their European counterparts. The downfall of the Spanish ship and more particularly its Spanish captain, Benito Cereno, is a mutiny staged by the African slaves on board, who manage to take over the ship demanding to be returned to Africa. The mutiny is born as a response to their harsh treatment and of the natural desire for freedom. Before the full story emerges, Delano still believes Cereno to be in control of his ship. This is one instance where Delano is shown to be less than perfect, so it is clear that Melville does not intend to present Delano or America as perfect, but rather as moving towards perfection as Delano does in slowly coming to understand the situation. Despite his misunderstanding early on he thinks to himself that “slavery breeds ugly passions in man” (*The Piazza Tales* 211) in response to Cereno hitting his personal servant, Babo. Although he later concludes that it was surely just a quarrel of those who are fond of each other, the statements tands. In reality, the event is part of a show being put on for the

American captain to convince him that Cereno is still in control of the ship. The fact that Delano states his concern at all suggests how much he finds Spanish customs wanting. Delano speculates that the reason Cereno previously attempted to get him out of the room might have been with the goal of being able to hit Babo without judgment. The fact that the possibility crosses Delano's mind reaffirms his distrust of the Spaniard and his disapproval of such actions. Such disapproval of the treatment of the slaves aboard the Spanish *San Dominick* is tied into Delano's Americanness. Earlier in the story, when Delano distributes water to the parched sailors on the Spanish ship, Melville writes, that in doing so "He complied, with republican impartiality as to this republican element...serving the oldest white no better than the youngest black" (*The Piazza Tales* 191) with the exception of Benito Cereno who apart from being the captain of the ship was also ill. While it is clear that such generosity implies that in a republic all deserve the same treatment, the reality was far from a universal ideal in a nation that would not abolish slavery for ten more years. The picture of Americans as being more egalitarian and dedicated to freedom, despite the contradictory reality, appears to be one Melville paints to contrast with Spain.

More specifically, the focus on the republican nature of Delano's actions makes clear what Melville considers to be an integral part of the American spirit he praises. If one were to look for a single thing to describe what made the American nation a different kind of project than Spain, its colonies, and indeed much of Europe at the time when Melville wrote the story the most notable feature would be just that – America's republican government, in contrast to the

monarchy of Spain and other European countries. When the nation was founded, the idea that a government based upon the votes of the public (if a rather select portion of it) could work was met with skepticism by many in Europe. The new nation was still convincing itself not only that it could work, but that, it could thrive. Nowhere was this more evident than in the writing of Count George-Louis Leclerc Buffon, an 18th century French intellectual and nobleman. Among his other notions, Buffon declared that the problem of America was that it had only recently emerged from the sea, and so its creatures could not compete with the hardier ones of the drier Europe. "That's why, he claimed, American animals and plants were smaller, more fragile and less diverse" (Krulwich). Americans at the time were still rather insecure about their own power and Buffon's statements so riled Thomas Jefferson, who was in France at the time, that he sent home for measurements of American animals to prove that they were larger. He eventually had a moose sent to him so that he could have visible proof of his claims. Much of his 1785, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, poked the buffoonery at the core of Buffon's argument. Jefferson pointed out that America was still a young nation, and as such to attack it for lacking, as yet, Virgils and Voltaires was unreasonable. If they still had no men of such stature when they had existed as long as the Greeks before they produced Homer then perhaps such objections might be made. Further, he pointed out, "In war we have produced a Washington...In physics we have produced a Franklin" and that "We have supposed Mr. Rittenhouse second to no astronomer living: that in genius he must be the first, because he is self-taught" (Jefferson). Such statements show the same dedication to personal

observation noted in both Melville and Emerson and the same self-defensive urge to prove America's worth found in Sam Dodsworth's impassioned defense of the nation. That lack of confidence persisted, and such uncertainty explains Melville's own aggressive pride in America's whaling capabilities and his insistence that the reason for Delano's fairness was republican spirit. He defended a form of government which, in living memory, had inspired Europe not successfully to such ideals as equality, but rather to the French Terror. Europe expressed great doubt as to the viability of republican government during and following the Revolution, and after the disaster of the French Revolution and the following rule of Napoleon and the wars he started much of Europe, particularly the aristocracy and nobility, was leery of such governments.

If the justice of America and Americans is one of the qualities which Melville attempts to highlight in the story, then the ending reinforces it. The story ends with a description of the trial of Babo, Cereno's personal servant, who led the rebellion. The trial papers include the true story of the events on the ship prior to Delano's arrival. After these descriptions there is a conversation between the two captains who trade compliments and thanks. During this discussion, Cereno explains that at the points when Delano thought him to be "so morose and ungrateful, nay, when, as you now admit, you half thought me plotting your murder" (*The Piazza Tales* 265), the truth was that Cereno was horrified by the knowledge that Delano, who showed him kindness from the moment he stepped onto the Spanish ship was to be killed for that kindness. This err on Delano's part demonstrates that Melville did not intend him to be a perfect character, as to be

perfect Delano would have needed to be kind in thought as well as deed throughout the story. In his role as representative of the nation, his failure to do so suggests that America's best moments come when it is understanding and kind rather than in its bigotry of thought and action. Despite this, at the end of the story, Delano's earlier assessments of Cereno as rather timid and weak-willed is correct. Despite the fact that he was saved from his perilous situation by Captain Delano, only three months after Babo's execution for mutiny, Cereno, at the monastery "did indeed follow his leader" (*The Piazza Tales* 270). Here "leader" refers to Babo, suggesting that Cereno's actions were motivated by fear. The assessment of his character as timid and unable to stand independently is plainly accurate. His death means that the judgment of Cereno as weak is never entirely removed from the narrative and Melville unequivocally states that Babo was Cereno's leader, read: better. In light of this, then, an examination of Delano's judgment of Cereno earlier in the story provides insight into the contrast Melville saw between Americans and Europeans.

The two characters who are compared as symbols of their respective cultures, Delano and Cereno, are noticeably both white. Their interactions with the Africans aboard the ship, particularly Babo, are important to the comparisons between the two white men, but the narrative ignores anything beyond the implicit desire for freedom as the motivation of Babo and the other African mutineers. In context, Delano's conclusion noted above that "slavery breeds ugly passions in man" (*The Piazza Tales* 211) focuses on the effects of slavery on slave-owners rather than the enslaved because it focuses on Cereno's apparent

cruelty. The result is that “man” means ‘white man’ because the effects upon the enslaved are ignored. Babo functions as a tool to demonstrate the flaws of Cereno and Spain and to highlight the virtues of Delano and America rather than standing as a character in his own right. This lets Melville use slaves as a tool to talk about American identity and the ways Americanness differs from Europeanness without having to directly confront the problems slavery presents to the principles of America he tries to highlight in Delano. Babo’s actions alone have little meaning, but when seen in the context of Cereno’s interactions with him they reveal Cereno’s weakness, and in the context of Delano’s actions they reveal his strength and kindness accordingly. Babo’s humanity and that of the other Negroes is taken from them and they become blank canvasses for the juxtaposition of colonial Spanish and American natures. In them is revealed not their own identities and stories but instead the truths of others’. Melville moves his struggle with the contradiction of a nation that claims freedom and liberty as it maintains slavery away from the forefront by focusing on Cereno and Delano’s interactions with the slaves. This leaves them with no options but to be the canvases, or tools for a discussion of moral superiority in an ideological battle between European and American ideals, where they provide a way for the white characters to demonstrate their morality and their flaws. The interactions and judgments that pass between Delano and Cereno are the true focus of the story, while the enslaved Africans, attempting to break free, exist only for their usefulness in that battle. The results of that battle are important and central to the story, but the use of Babo and his peers should be considered as well.

Delano's judgment of Cereno is harsh, for all that he maintains pity for the man throughout their interactions. When Delano hears about the (false) troubles of Cereno's voyage, including becalmed seas, he notes that such calms are unusual in the region, and the length of time the ship apparently drifted is questionable. Delano thinks to himself that the ship's drifting for so long must be attributed in part "both to clumsy seamanship and faulty navigation" (*The Piazza Tales* 137-8). It is, of course, later revealed that Cereno has been stalling the mutineers by telling them that because the ship had insufficient supplies for a journey across the Atlantic to return the slaves to Africa and so they need to first stop on land to obtain more. It was in the process of trying to reach an isolated island (as Babo insisted they not go anywhere they might be seen by people) that the ship ended up in becalmed waters. Such facts do suggest that Cereno's actions were less questionable than they first seem to Delano, but Delano's assessment of Cereno's flaws goes further. He observes Cereno's hands, concluding that the man became the captain of the ship not by skill but by social status, and says to himself "why wonder at incompetence, in youth, sickness, and gentility united" (*The Piazza Tales* 138). Such a judgment is not one that changes as a result of Delano's realization that Cereno had been in less control of the situation than he originally suspected. Whether or not he is still in command of his ship, to Delano a seaman whose body shows no sign of having done the work of a sailor would presumably always be unimpressive regardless of the circumstances.

The fact that this incompetence is tied into Cereno's good breeding should be looked at specifically in context of Delano's focus on republican ideals. The

implication of his scorn of Cereno for such gentility is that Delano himself achieved his rank through his own hard work. This dynamic can then be seen to extend to a general suggestion that the idealized American way of giving power and prestige only to those who earn it is superior to European traditions of aristocracy over merit. The point that Americans are stronger and more capable than Europeans is further driven home by the fact that Delano's crew is able to prevail where Cereno's was not, taking the ship back from Babo and his followers. Given the general disdain expressed for Cereno and his crew, Delano believes that their troubles are due in part to incompetence (*The Piazza Tales* 137) and the fact that they were unable to stop the mutiny. Delano and his American crew are more capable because of practices that are American. The suggestion is that when sailors gain authority based on their parentage, they are not as skilled as those who have to show their competence first. America was founded on democratic principles, not hereditary power, with the revolutionary concept that "All men are created equal." By telling a story where these ideals allow Americans to be more successful than the Europeans, Melville makes his support of America's founding principles clear.

Melville's defense of these principles, particularly in this story, reveals one of the central struggles of the quest for American identity that he was engaged in (and that Lewis would be take up several decades later), for he realized the disparity between the ideals and practice of American equality. The republican principles of America that captain Delano is so proud of look very good on paper. The idea that everyone should be given water equally without preference is

similarly noble. But the reality of the nation was nothing of the sort. When the United States first tried to define its own identity in the Declaration of Independence and in the Revolutionary War that followed, the founders set forth ringing ideals of liberty, justice, and equality. They planned to make a new kind of nation, and many of the precepts laid out in the Declaration and later in the Constitution are obvious rebuttals to specific laws and policies in England and Europe at large. The Declaration of Independence lists many grievances against the king, including “depriving us, in many cases, of trial by jury” (United States (Declaration of Independence) 6) and later in the Constitution it is stated that “The trial of all crimes, except in cases of impeachment, shall be by jury; and such trial shall be held in the state where the said crimes shall have been committed” (United States (Constitution) 24). The second case is clearly a direct response to the grievance addressed in the first, showing how specifically the founders of the nation demonstrated their intention to make the United States different from Britain. Those differences were supposed to make the nation more just, and there the start of the problems can be found. The declaration set out the sweeping statement “All men are created equal” and “they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights.” The trouble existed from the very beginning, because America never lived up to those standards. The most obvious and troubling failure of the principles that Delano seems to support so strongly and which Melville is presumably defending in his defense of America was slavery. The problem of how America could really be all (or any) of the things it claimed to be while continuing to allow people to own other human beings was

one that made any definition of American identity true to the founding words impossible. The injustice was rampant throughout the nation, renders Delano's trumpeting of American values prescriptive rather than descriptive. American *ought* to be free, but connecting the two sides was impossible. This resulted in deeply strange attitudes towards American identity in general, and towards the institution of slavery in particular.

These contradictory ideas come through in "Benito Cereno," and encapsulate a desire simultaneously to distance America from its European roots in injustice and an unwillingness to abandon the institution of slavery which people continued to find profitable if morally indefensible. The changing perspectives in "Benito Cereno" from the original presentation of the Spanish ship as commanded by Cereno to the later understanding that Babo is in control, mirror the confused understanding America had of itself. When he believes Cereno is in control of the ship and of Babo, Delano is able to comfortably observe that the 'ugly passions' slavery stirs in man but once he realizes that Babo controls the ship Delano's judgment is called into question even though the same wicked institution bred the violence of the slaves against their former masters. Delano's sympathy returns to Cereno, but the facts are clear: the cause of the trials of Cereno is the enslavement of human beings, and that lack of freedom is not in keeping with the avowed principles of republicanism Delano supports. The same problem faced the nation as a whole, and its indecisiveness on the subject is suggested to be dangerous by the events of "Benito Cereno."

The Old World had the benefit of history that United States did not, even as democratic ideals became more common there. Such cognitive dissonance might be explained away by tradition in Europe, but as Sinclair Lewis insisted, America could not fall back on historical tradition because no such tradition existed. The result, at least in Melville's examination of American identity in "Benito Cereno", is an inability to directly address the issue combined with an inability to ignore it. The simple choice to tell this specific story about African slaves who take over the ship of their master, kill him, and force the ship's captain to obey them places slavery at the center of the narrative. Further, the American ship has no slaves, which places slavery on the side of the weaker, foolish Spaniards in a narrative that goes out of its way to insist that America is better than Europe and that its principles of freedom and equality are fundamental to that superiority. By emphasizing this when Delano gives water to the people on the Spanish ship, the *San Dominick*, in mentioning how he distributes the water in a "republican" fashion, regardless of age or skin color Melville brings notions of race and slavery to the reader's attention. It is odd, in a story that hinges so much on slavery, that America's own slavery does not come up at all. It is odder when Delano more than once thinks of slavery in a way that suggests his disapproval of the institution. Such thoughts suggest a dissonant mind, cementing the idea that Delan, like America, is not perfect. As noted above, he finds himself uncomfortable with the idea of Cereno hitting Babo, but his observations of the interactions between Cereno and Babo go further. He regards the relationship as a mutually beneficial one, and at one point says to Cereno "I envy you such a

friend; slave I cannot call him” (*The Piazza Tales* 135). His positive view of that relationship is based in the idea that ‘slave’ is the wrong term for such a relationship, and it seems like it should follow that if such a relationship as he perceives is desirable, and exists only outside any thought of slavery, then Delano should disapprove of slavery overall. He makes no such statements, but his repeated discomfort and the lack of any slaves on the American ship suggests at the very least no particular support for slavery.

Then, at the end of the story, it is discovered that the situation was more fraught than it initially appeared. The revelation that the slaves had taken over the ship and killed their owner who had been originally involved in their transport changes the appearance of the interactions between the slaves and sailors generally, and Babo and Cereno in particular. Delano’s thought after his compliment to Cereno on the friendship between him and Babo of the “beauty of that relationship which could present such a spectacle of fidelity on the one hand and confidence on the other” (*The Piazza Tales* 135) is put in a different light, with the word ‘spectacle’ suddenly seeming more important; after all, that is all that the relationship ever was, a show put on to conceal the truth of who controls the situation. The message ends up mixed. It is unclear whether or not Melville intended to suggest that friendship between races is good and exists outside the idea of slavery or if he means to imply that any time such a relationship appears to exist it is a falsehood and not to be trusted. Certainly in *Moby Dick* the friendship between Ishmael and Queequeg appears real, if not necessarily equal, suggesting a different model for interracial friendships than the one that turns out to be false

in “Benito Cereno.” Ishmael says soon after meeting Queequeg when the two are in bed together that the two of them are already quite close, that “in our hearts’ honeymoon, lay I and Queequeg - a cosy, loving pair” (*Moby Dick* 53). This musing follows Ishmael participating in a pagan ritual of Queequeg’s, showing the sincerity with which he considers this friendship. Ishmael may exoticize Queequeg’s religious practices, but he does not belittle them, and in that respect can be found the basis for their friendship. It appears, therefore, that the difficulty of friendship, even the lie of friendship, presented in “Benito Cereno” originates in the complicator of slavery.

Delano’s alarm at what he believes to be Cereno striking Babo for slipping while shaving him, when Delano wonders if it was “to wreak in private his Spanish spite against this poor friend of his that Don Benito, by his sullen manner impelled me to withdraw” (*The Piazza Tales* 210) combined with his statements above that Babo is a friend to Cereno and his care to treat the sailors and slaves equally shows a concern for justice which is borne out at the end of the story, when evidence surfaces from Babo’s trial. The shift to court documents (within the fictional world of the narrative in translation from the Spanish courts) is not a necessary one. Earlier parts of the story, including the false account of events Cereno gives Delano about the ship having gone off course use the device of character dialogue, and such a conversation could have been used to tell the story of what actually happened just as well as records of court proceedings. The question thus naturally arises: what purpose is served by the odd format? The answer might be found in the text’s preoccupation with justice exhibited earlier in

Delano's interest in the status of the slaves, their fair treatment at his own hand and at the hands of others, and the strange national posturing evident in the differences so regularly drawn between the Spaniards and the American.

Given the fact that much of the earlier portion of the book shows Cereno as weak where Delano is strong, incompetent where Delano is successful, and of questionable justice where Delano is unflinchingly fair the fact that the court where the proceedings take place is a Spanish one is interesting. It is, of course, only natural that the court be Spanish as the principal actors in the case are Spanish, but the choice to tell this part of the story through the lens of the court is not the only choice Melville could have made. The Spanish court does not seem generally to be truly incompetent. The reader sees testimony from witnesses, and the final result is that Babo is executed. However, that testimony continues to support the idea that Delano, in his Americanness, has a greater sense of justice than that of the Spanish. In telling his story Captain Cereno explains that some of the slaves were killed not during the fight when Delano and his men took the ship but later on by the sailors. The reader can conclude that the harm done to sailors' pride was the source of their actions, but this is not the most interesting part of the passage. The vital point is Cereno's statement that as soon as he realized what was happening Delano "used all his authority, and, in particular with his own hand, struck down Martinez Gola, who, having found a razor in the pocket of an old jacket of his, which one of the shackled negroes had on, was aiming it at the negro's throat" (*The Piazza Tales* 263) and that he similarly grabbed a dagger out of the hand of another sailor. The specific description of the weapons is

important. The razor is in the pocket of a coat belonging to the sailor but worn by the slave, suggesting that it was stolen in the mutiny, and the dagger mentioned was “secreted at the time of the massacre of the whites” (*The Piazza Tales* 263). Such descriptions keep the reasons for the white sailors’ hostility at the forefront of the reader’s mind, reminding them that many white sailors were killed before the story begins, but emphasize that such killings of the slaves are still unacceptable as judged by Delano who continues to be the moral force of the story. It places him in the position of justice while the Spanish sailors are led astray by their base emotions, and because it is the American Delano rather than even the Spanish captain, Cereno, who stops the sailors it is clear that his actions are not a result of higher rank on the ship alone. It is one thing, apparently, for the mutineers to be hanged for their actions after a trial, but to kill them without one is apparently utterly unacceptable to him. The trial, the acting out of the process of justice, is the factor that makes the difference.

As a member of a nation that has prided itself on its trials since the early days when it was decided that jury trials were a right as a response to British policies as noted above, Delano sees the trial as intrinsically part of the process of securing justice for the sailors on the San Dominick, both those who died and those who were forced to do the bidding of the mutineers. Delano at various points in the story is an embodiment of American ideals designed to defend America’s goodness, and perhaps it is necessary that Melville make the Spanish court less than successful in its implementation of justice. The expectation of the end of a story like “Benito Cereno” is that there will be satisfaction, the wicked

(Babo) will be defeated, the hero (Delano) will be triumphant, and the injured (Cereno) will be rescued and will live on in safety. This is not the case with “Benito Cereno”. Even Cereno’s testimony makes it clear that he is not doing well. His testimony ends with a statement “that when finally dismissed by the court, he shall not return home to Chili, but betake himself to the monastery on Mount Agonia” (*The Piazza Tales* 264). Sure enough, he goes to the monastery after the trial, and three months after Babo’s death Cereno too dies. Such an ending is not satisfying to a reader. There is no sense of triumph, at least not on behalf of Cereno. Delano certainly acquits himself well, but Cereno, the titular character who embodies Europeans and the Spanish in particular shows himself to be too weak to overcome his ill health or the betrayal of the slaves aboard his ship. It would appear that, despite being made without all the facts, Delano’s early assessment of Cereno as too gently bred, delicate, and incompetent to captain a ship is accurate. Moreover, it is accurate in direct contrast to Delano’s own successes. The subtext is clear: America, with its sturdiness, its innovative politics, its justice, and its newness is the future of the world. It has apparently left the old world in its dust as it races ahead to new forms of government. Monarchy might have been successful in the past, but in the present, Melville suggests republican government is superior.

Slavery does not fit this mold, perhaps accounting for Melville’s difficulty in considering it in “Benito Cereno.” He attempts to brand it as part of the old, falling world, but reality dispels such a separation because for all that the Spanish ship is the only one to carry slaves in the story slavery still existed in the United

States. The resulting attempt to brand slavery, as shown in the story, as bad and dangerous while sidestepping the question of whether it is always dangerous and wrong creates a confused message that conveys sympathy for the slaves alongside the victory of righteous defeat of them and concern for equality alongside condemnation of their revolt for freedom. Melville did not decide what stance he would take on slavery overall, and the resulting story has no clear message.

Delano and Cereno's interactions take place on the sea, a fact that cannot be ignored given earlier considerations of the possibilities of the ocean in Melville's mind. However, it is not entirely clear that Melville was successful in proving everything he wished to prove with "Benito Cereno." Readers continue to argue about its meaning. Melville clearly communicates ideas of American superiority and also the vision of America as the future of the world. The presentation of other nations is useful primarily in the ways their depiction reflects a superior America, destined to become the leader of mankind and dramatized by Cereno's need to be rescued. Such a judgment is not unique to this story. At the end of *Moby Dick*, Ishmael survives using the coffin Queequeg has been building for himself, a symbol of America rising out of the ashes of not only Europe but also the 'barbarous' peoples of the earth. Queequeg can be a friend, he can even be seen fondly, but in the end, as good a man as he may be, his time is over. The answers of the ocean are even, to an extent, forthcoming when mystery of Cereno's strange behavior is explained by the trial. Despite this, while the conviction of American superiority is conveyed, what Americanness is, beyond superior, is not entirely clear, and it leaves the reader uncertain.

That uncertainty plagues another of Melville's stories, "Bartleby the Scrivener". At the end of the story the narrator, who works with Bartleby for a time, admits to being unsatisfied with the ending, and the reader naturally shares that feeling. Interestingly, this story, like "Benito Cereno", involves the legal system, as Bartleby is eventually arrested as a vagrant. Unlike "Benito Cereno", however, there is no enlightening court case and Bartleby does not give any reason for his odd behavior and determination to do only as he wishes and to wish to do nothing but be a clerk to the exclusion of all else, including living in a place outside of his work or doing work he does not wish to do. In refusing the narrator any explanation of Bartleby's actions, Melville refuses the same information to the readers of the story. Moreover, just as this lack of information frustrates the narrator, Melville assumes that it will frustrate the reader, a fact acknowledged within the text when the narrator mentions the possibility that the reader will be curious and wish to know anything that may be known of Bartleby. Melville expects his readers to care about "who Bartleby was, and what manner of life he led prior to the present narrator's making his acquaintance" (*The Piazza Tales* 106) and this expectation of curiosity implies an expectation that his audience cares to know not only what a person does but also why they do it, what it is about their nature that causes them to behave as they do.

Without this assumption of the need to know why Bartleby is the way he is the story loses all its force. If the reader does not care to understand the motives behind Bartleby's polite but unflinching statements of "I would prefer not to" (first appearing on page 48 of *The Piazza Tales*) then there is no point to the story

beyond the narrator's descriptions of clerks who are, though perhaps a little eccentric not particularly interesting in their actions. Certainly if the reader has no interest in why Bartleby is so focused and so determined only to copy and later on to stay in the building where the office used to be after the narrator has moved on then there is no reason that a story which outside of such curiosity has no point should be included in the same collection as stories like the one discussed above, "Benito Cereno". Therefore, it is quite safe to say that Melville expects the reader to care about the answer to the question.

In unraveling the reasons he expects the reader to care it is, perhaps, best to start with the point where the narrator first finds himself confounded by Bartleby's refusal to compare a piece of writing with him. The narrator explains that if there had been any "uneasiness, anger impatience or impertinence in his manner; in other words, had there been anything ordinarily human about him, doubtless I should have violently dismissed him from the premises" (*The Piazza Tales* 49). This explanation makes it clear that it is not just Bartleby's actions that the narrator finds so disturbing, but also his attitude and his indifference. This indifference is not just confusing to him, but is so strange as to mark Bartleby as inhuman. The message is clear: without emotion, without a personal history and basis for one's actions and existence, a person loses his humanity. It is not difficult to extrapolate the stress with which the narrator views Bartleby and with which Melville expects the reader to view Bartleby to the idea that if America cannot find its own identity, it will lose its humanity and even its existence.

Without any long historical past to base its actions on America must define its identity because it cannot rely on past experiences.

In this fear, so clearly expressed in a story that, unlike many of Melville's other tales occurs not at sea but on land, the motivation of Melville's search for meaning and for the definition of America in those other stories can be found. If the mysteries of humanity are to be found in the ocean, then in order that the American nation might survive it is necessary to go to sea in search of them. Similarly, if America as it is cannot be reconciled with America as it claims to be, then an answer must be searched for. Melville does not seem to find his answer, but the desperation with which he seeks it can be explained, perhaps, by fear that without such an identity neither he nor his country exists at all.

MARK TWAIN

If any American author can be said to truly epitomize in himself the complexity of American identity it is Mark Twain, or Samuel Clemens. There are two names here, and the fictional one, who wrote the books, is the one people remember. It would not be unreasonable to say that Twain observed America, grasping what was both the rotten and good aspects of its core, and pulled them out in works that covered a range of topics from politics and the military, to “life on the Mississippi” and in medieval England, to the conditions of African Americans and Pacific Islanders. In satire, he was merciless, berating politicians and clergy and Americans of all stripes. His novels, particularly *Huckleberry Finn* and *Tom Sawyer*, remain required reading in many schools in America. The cover of Justin Kaplan’s biography, *Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain: A Biography*, includes the subtitle “The story of the literary genius who defined post-Civil War America, a nation finding itself again.” It is impossible to read Mark Twain without confronting the complexities of America. Twain challenged the notion that a single person could create a true portrait of America, but even he could not escape completely the urge to speak of the nation as a whole and many of his readers throughout two centuries regard him as an oracle.

It is certainly true that Twain’s writings cut to the center of America revealing both her faults and her triumphs. He was writing at a crucial moment

when the nation was trying to redefine itself after a bloody war had torn it apart. Twain's writing sought to help define America at this time and if Justin Kaplan is correct about the nation "finding" itself again, Twain's efforts were short-lived. By the time Sinclair Lewis' novels appeared, America, once again, had no fixed identity. The nation may have found some sense of itself after the Civil War, but it certainly had not developed a fixed identity that could endure. Nonetheless, Twain's writing says valuable things about America, from his earliest short stories and novels to the dark and angry essays from the last decade of his life. Twain cared deeply about the nation, as his satiric, candid, deadly serious humor and parody reveal. His obsession with finding the truth of the nation has links to both Melville and Lewis, not to mention DeVoto.

The confused nature of the treatment of the African slaves in "Benito Cereno" makes it clear that Melville did not know what to do with an America that had failed to match its ideals with its reality. Twain reacted to the same perceived disparity by picking at it, making it clear that the nation disappointed. The small town of *Tom Sawyer* is not unlike Gopher Prairie, and Twain could have simply examined such places had he chosen to do so. Instead, in *Huckleberry Finn*, Huck and Jim find themselves traveling down the Mississippi. Twain chose them as his protagonists quite intentionally: Huck is a boy from the wrong side of the tracks whose father is an abusive drunk; he finds his Aunt's way of living totally unsuited to him. Jim is a runaway slave. Twain went to the very bottom of society and told the stories of the people he found there.

Huckleberry Finn, as the narrator, is the reader's guide and we are compelled to trust him. Moreover, his experience of the world becomes the reader's experience because he narrates the story in first person. In his experiences of the town where he begins the story, a reader can find the roots of the Gopher Prairies of Lewis – the small towns of America filled with small minded people whose greatest flaws include not just their small mindedness and prejudice but also their dullness. He explains the rules of Widow Douglas' house in a way that suggests just how silly he finds them. For example, he explains that at supper time the Widow rung a bell, and he had to go to the table, and then “when you got to the table you couldn't go right to eating, but you had to wait for the widow to tuck down her head and grumble a little over the victuals, though there warn't really anything the matter with them” (*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* 2). The reader knows that the grumbling is grace, but to Huck, the ritual is a foolish interruption in the quest to get food. His reactions to religion at other times are similar in that he consistently is unimpressed or at least confused by it. His interactions with Widow Douglas and her sister, Miss Watson who lives with her, are more than simple windows into their lives: they are also representative of the ways in which the practices of adults mystify children. Twain also suggests that their ways mystify adults just as much. Widow Douglas is kind and the way she describes Providence is inviting to Huck, but Miss Watson's version is harsher and less kind. The result is that Huck concludes “that there was two Providences, and a poor chap would stand considerable show with the Widow's Providence, but if Miss Watson's got him there warn't no help for

him any more” (*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* 18). Such different attitudes both reveal Twain’s own negative opinions about Evangelical Protestantism and underscore the truths Huck finds in his journey with Jim. There are different sides to most things, religion included, and some are a great deal worse than others. Miss Watson’s fire and brimstone hell seems quite foreign to the Widow Douglas’s peaceable kingdom of heaven. This American duality crops up repeatedly in Twain’s novels, and suggests one of the reasons Americans have so much difficulty finding a single American identity – American identity has never been singular despite its claims otherwise.

The fact that Huck sees the two-sided nature of American society connects to the fact that he is a relatively uneducated child. He is still learning about the world and he lacks the preconceptions of an adult or even a child like Tom Sawyer, whose time in Sunday school as detailed in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, may not be particularly focused, but which exists nonetheless. Tom is the epitome of the child indoctrinated by the status quo of religion and by the society largely built around church life. Huck is the marginalized boy who criticism of society underscores the fact that he lives outside of the center; he is given free rein to criticize the society. Choosing a child protagonist allows Twain to confront the multiple versions of America. For all that Huck may not fully understand the rules and religion of the widow Douglas and Miss Watson, he does know how people are supposed to function around issues of race. This is obvious in his interactions with Jim.

Jim's presence in the story as a slave, who has run away from his mistress, is vital to understanding Huck's transgressions of the status quo. Having already established Huck as an at least somewhat more neutral judge of the world, Huck's reaction to being told that Jim has run away is telling. Huck, who knew of Jim's actions and promised he would not tell anyone, says "I said I wouldn't and I'll stick to it. ...People would call me a lowdown Abolitionist and despise me for keeping mum – but that don't make no difference" (*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* 67). Huck makes it clear that he knows that society expects him to turn Jim in, but Huck would rather stick to his word. He is not sure that he approves of Jim's actions but he is equally unsure that turning Jim in would be right. When he says that he will not be returning to the town anyway, the reader knows that this is a tacked-on sentiment, designed to make his protection of Jim secondary. He made his promise, and to break it would be wrong in his mind. It is not until much later in their journey together that he decides for reasons having to do with friendship and kindness not to turn in Jim.

That decision is a turning point in the book, after a long series of moments when Huck struggles with his conscience. After writing a letter to Miss Watson telling her where Jim is, Huck begins to think about Jim, and finds that "somehow I couldn't seem to strike no places to harden me against him, but only the other kind" (*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* 321). He thinks about the fact that he is Jim's only friend, and he finds that when he must make a choice he cannot betray Jim and decides not to send the letter, crying "All right, then, I'll GO to hell" (*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* 321). At this point, Twain revisits

Huck's reactions to the religion of the Widow Douglas and Miss Watson. Using their logic, what would get Huck to heaven is antithetical to the path he considers to be morally correct. Huck and Jim have become friends, and to turn against Jim would be a betrayal of that friendship. So, if the "right thing" for Huck to do in the eyes of the church and of society at large is to turn Jim in, the reader must side with Huck, who intuitively knows that no one should own another person. Huck sees Jim as a human being and friend and not as a thing. The emotional response, and the right one, ought to be to protect Jim, and when Huck makes that choice it is not just a choice in favor of Jim, but it is also a repudiation of the mores of his community.

That such prevailing mores of Hannibal and its environs are harmful reflects a larger truth: much of American society's mores are harmful too. Twain began writing *Huckleberry Finn* in the summer of 1876 but did not finish it until 1884 (Kaplan 197). During that time he sometimes went years without working on it, but always returned to it. That persistence, suggests Kaplan, came from the fact that Twain was invested in the project, not just because it was a literary endeavor he had begun, but also because he was "a man desperately needing to resolve his own bewilderments about conscience and the restraints and freedoms of the community" (Kaplan 197). The difficulties Huck experiences fall into precisely these categories, as Huck finds freedom in leaving town, befriending Jim and traveling with him, and escaping Pap, his father. But he simultaneously finds restraints in the form of his sense that in going against what he has been

taught he is committing dreadful crimes, as when he concludes that he cannot turn Jim in after all, and so he must go to hell.

This conflict is one that Twain described as “a sound heart and a deformed conscience come into collision and conscience suffers defeat” (Kaplan 198).

Huck’s soundness of heart comes from his youth, and his early years spent without much education suggest that his conscience is significantly less developed along socially mandated lines than those of other characters. And Twain certainly thinks that conscience is designed by society. As an example, he needed only look to his own childhood upbringing, when the institution of slavery went entirely unquestioned, and so seemed perfectly natural. His awareness of the fact that conscience can be shaped in such ways seeps into the book and into his choice of Huck as his protagonist. The novel essentially posits that if a sufficiently impressionable person, such as a child, finds the opportunity to understand slavery from the perspective of interacting on a level of equality with a runaway slave, that person must naturally come to conclusion that slavery is wrong. This concept works because Huck is still learning about the world. It makes sense in the context of an audience that at first thought *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was a boy’s book and a text that might teach its readers a greater understanding of the world. The fact that his focus is on the issue that continued to rend the nation suggests that Twain expected this truly adult book to provide some guidance for the American public. By setting the novel in a pre-Civil War America, he could also make commentary on the issues of race and national identity that persisted in the 1880s and beyond.

This is not so strange. American identity has been a concern of Americans since at least the founding of the country when the Declaration of Independence so carefully laid out the fact that Americans were not British and, Melville, for one, is an example of how the need to understand the world, its people, and Americans in particular has driven Americans. As a result, if Twain wanted to create characters his audience would understand and identify with, writing books about children like Huck and Tom Sawyer was sensible. Children are always learning about the world, and so their learning process seems natural and expected, and can guide even adult readers along the same path, particularly if it is a path they are already somewhat willing to tread in their own curiosity. This is still truer because the book was thought of as being for children. Twain could safely assume that his readers possessed such curiosity because it was a curiosity common to so many Americans.

And it seems clear that Twain wanted his country men and women to tread that path with him; he wanted to show them the failings of the South (and Northern apologists) that went along with slavery, as he had begun to hate his homeland for those reasons (Kaplan 243). If Twain had no interest in the message his readers took away from the book there are more than enough stories he could have told that would have been less controversial, and in some eyes better suited to a book about children. Yet, he chose instead to portray a story about a boy who abandons society, breaks laws, and rebuilds his morals from what he himself experiences rather than from what he has been told. The book Twain did write was published in February of 1885 and by March of that year it had already been

banned by the Public Library of Concord, Mass. (Kaplan 268). Naturally the ban only increased his sales, but his frustration that *Huckleberry Finn* was banned while the Bible and the newspapers, which reported far more scandalous stories than anything he had written is telling. He saw the morals of Huck's story as just, even if the nature of the character and way he interacts with the world around him (or perhaps more accurately the way the world interacts with Huck) are rough and sometimes profane. His frustration alone makes it clear that in the novel Twain was attempting to do more than simply tell a story; he was trying change the way people thought and express his disdain for current beliefs.

More than that, Twain portrayed a society that was complicated, that had its good aspects but also was terrible in many ways. Twain's pessimism is clear in much of his writing and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* can easily be seen as a condemnation of much of his contemporary American society. Even apart from their interactions with slavery, the people who populate the pages of the book are often horrifying. It is difficult for a reader not to be alarmed by Huck's father, who gets angry with him for having gone to school and for learning to read because he thinks it will make Huck think he is better than Pap. Moreover, despite the fact that Pap is a violent drunk and he not only beats Huck for attending school, but insists that Huck get him money for alcohol, the judge in the court insists that he be given custody of his son, because "he said courts mustn't interfere and separate families if they could help it" (*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* 33). Somehow, even after that judge's attempts to reform Pap are woefully unsuccessful he keeps charge of his son, and it would be difficult not

to question a society that allows a boy to be cared for by a father who abuses him out of a misplaced concern for family relationships. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* suggests that family relationships are central to American ideas about Americans, but also that rigid enforcement of tradition makes a mockery of justice. Twain foreshadows any number of problems that were to persist into the 20th and 21st centuries.

Family relationships play an important role in another of his novels, *The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson*, but in a very different way. The decision of Roxy, a slave, to switch her own son, Valet de Chambre, known as Chambers, with the master's son, Thomas a Becket Driscoll, is a way of altering familial ties. She is able to do so precisely because those 'family ties' have been so often violated by slave masters that her son is "thirty-one parts white" (*The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson* 16) and only one part black and looks a great deal like Tom Driscoll. It is this similarity in the infants that allows Roxy to switch them. The result is that the boys are raised in each other's places, and it is not until many years later that the swap is discovered. The events in the intervening years have their own interest, not least of which is the interest the people of Dawson's Landing take in the appearance of Italian twins. When Rowena learns that such exotic people will be lodging in her mother's home she cries "Italians! How romantic! Just think, Ma—there's never been one in this town, and everybody will be dying to see them, and they're all OURS!" (*The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson* 57). She is not wrong, and the fascination of the town with the Italian twins certainly does speak to the trend of fascination with understanding those who are 'other' and of the

aggressive curiosity seen in other works discussed previously like *Main Street*. However, that curiosity and obsession with seeking to understand humanity is not the most interesting aspect of *The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson*. Rather, it comes at the very end of the story, after the revelation that the man called Tom Driscoll for so long was born Chambers and the one called Chambers born Tom. This discovery occurs only after the false Tom kills his false uncle for money and attempts to frame one of the Italian twins. The men are put into their 'proper' places for the first time since they were infants, but the results are not what would be expected if, as it was so often claimed, there was something intrinsic to Africans and their descendants that made them suited to service while whites were not. If that were true, after the switch the boys should fit more naturally into their roles than they had before. Instead, the boys, having been switched, are ill-suited to their new roles.

Twain does not show this by telling the reader of any difficulties the true Chambers has in adjusting to life as a slave, but instead through the difficulty Tom has in joining the half of the culture for which he was originally destined. Tom is illiterate, has no training in the manners appropriate to one of his standing, and cannot hide these difficulties. Worst of all is not his manners however, but his own discomfort. Having been raised as a slave, the adult Tom Driscoll "could not endure the terrors of the white man's parlor, and felt at home and at peace nowhere but in the kitchen. The family pew was a misery to him, yet he could nevermore enter into the solacing refuge of the 'nigger gallery'" (*The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson* 284). All this is to say that Tom Driscoll, having been raised

to be a slave, cannot develop a self that is comfortable in the world that now claims him as its own. In this result, Twain suggests that rather than any natural destiny towards the roles society gives them, people are taught their roles, and learn to act accordingly. Simultaneously, the mere fact that the ruse was successful for so long suggests that the distinctions of race are less meaningful than people so want them to be. The reader cannot escape the questions Roxy raises when she realizes that dressed in the other boys clothes her son looks just as grand as he does, as if there is no particular difference between the two of them at least as infants except in their clothes. And Twain's story suggests that any other difference is just as false as it begins to seem to Roxy in those moments. It is the society in which they live, not some inborn truth that makes some people slaves and some people free.

Mark Twain's novels, especially *Huckleberry Finn*, are often on lists of American "classics." Despite this, Twain certainly did not think that he was writing about America as a whole. In fact, he was quite convinced that to do anything of the sort was entirely impossible. He insisted that the only sort of person who could write about a place accurately, truly speaking to the souls of the people who live there was the "native novelist." Such a person could only come to the necessary understanding by living in a place for years, absorbing the culture subconsciously rather than attempting to observe it from an outsider's perspective. The native novelist could not, according to Twain, have that competence in another place because "Even the native novelist becomes a foreigner, with a foreigners limitations, when steps from the State whose life is

familiar to him into a state whose life he has not lived" ("From The North American Review Mark Twain 1895" 127). Thus, no single person could write about the entire nation.

And unlike Lewis's conviction that small towns in the Midwest were like small towns in the rest of the country, or Melville's search for the identity of America to legitimize the nation, for Twain, the American nation was fundamentally not one group. The only way to get a real portrait of the nation, in his mind, was for many, many people to write about their small patch of earth, and those books collectively might become the portrait the nation wanted. And that 'many' is serious. He begins with "the life of a group in a New England village; in a New York village; in a Texan village; in an Oregon village; in villages in fifty States and Territories; then the farm life in fifty States and Territories" ("From The North American Review Mark Twain 1895" 127) then explains that there will have to be stories from all walks of life in hundreds of places. He then goes on to list groups defined by race, religion, and occupation, a list which numbers thirty before he is through (or more if you consider groupings like "the Idiots and the Congressmen" who are put together without commas as is the case for most to be two items). His ultimate conclusion is that there will have to be at least a thousand novels, and that only then will there be any true literary portrait of America. To imagine that Twain was attempting to write the Great American Novel is foolish. Mark Twain fundamentally believed that only local color existed, and so that is what he wrote. He would not have thought that the story of Huck and Jim would have much to say about the life of someone living in

New York, and perhaps the oddity of declaring his work to be somehow universally American becomes obvious. This is not to say that Twain's work had nothing to say about life in other parts of the country; simply that it could neither come out of nor represent those other places.

Twain thought that nations could have a single national identity. He suggests as examples of what America lacks "the French vivacity and German gravity and English stubbornness" ("From The North American Review Mark Twain 1895" 128), but insists that America has no such singular temperament that is shared by the entire nation. When he lays out the list of things that might be uniform across the country and therefore tie it together but which do not, it is difficult to argue with his reasoning. It is true that there is no single way of thinking or of conversing or of dressing or appearance or manners that is uniform across the nation. The subject of beverages was the only area where Twain could find any universally American preference, a single thing that "can be called by the wide name 'American'. That is the national devotion to ice-water" ("From The North American Review Mark Twain 1895" 128). It would be difficult to argue that the enjoyment of cold drinks is somehow definitive of American identity, which is of course the reason Twain permits the example in an essay which otherwise attacks the entire idea of the existence of a single American identity.

He is not wrong. The mere existence of both Chicagos and Gopher Prairies makes it clear that Lewis' condemnation of the nation as one dominated by the latter is less than accurate, and for all of Melville's pride in American whaling, that business was in reality concentrated in just a few American cities

and was certainly not common to the entire continent. At the same time, Twain's intense refusal to accept the idea of a single American identity beyond one that is laughable at best is just as intense a response to the concept as Melville's desperate search to confirm the existence of the country or Lewis' attempts to defend it in *Dodsworth*. The endless listing of the people who must tell their stories before the portrait of the nation can be truly complete suggests that Twain had given the matter a great deal of thought, and found the prospect overwhelming. Listing more than thirty categories of people who would need to tell the stories of themselves is not just an attempt at completeness, but one at overwhelming the reader, as if trying desperately to curtail the instinct to define the nation for fear of what that attempt will do, so overwhelming is it in its impossibility.

This anxiety about the question of American identity, which is perhaps as apparent in Twain's ardent disavowal of its possible existence, as it is in other authors attempts to seek it, represents the one other thing, apart from ice in drinks, that ties much of America and certainly of American literature together. The fact that the idea of a single identity is as distressing to Twain as the lack of one appeared to be to Lewis and Melville suggests that this question is one that is itself central to American identity. Melville's own discomfort with the differences between the identity the nation tried to claim and the reality of slavery and uncertainty seems to hold true for Twain as well in its own way. He was more than willing to criticize the southern culture he knew so well and to write about it, but he did not think he was criticizing America as a whole when he did so, and he

certainly he did not think he was depicting it, as made clear by his conviction that the nation was too varied for such a task to be possible.

Twain was intensely critical of America, specifically of the contrast between the America that was spoken about and the America that was. In an essay titled “To the Person Sitting in Darkness,” which was originally published in the *North American Review* in 1901 Twain begins with selections from several articles all published around the same time. The first is a cheery statement from the *New York Tribune* on Christmas Eve insisting that the nation is happy and well, and any grumblers will have difficulty finding anyone to listen to them. The others describe horrors, both oppressive criminal activity in American cities and atrocities of colonialism committed abroad. Twain begins his response to these tidings by saying “By happy luck, we get all these glad tidings on Christmas Eve – just in time to enable us to celebrate the day with proper gaiety and enthusiasm” (*The Writings of Mark Twain* 252), a statement that is clearly sarcastic and angry, as no one could celebrate statements like “*the education of infants begins with the knowledge of prostitution*” (*The Writings of Mark Twain* 251) and “it is a fact that to-day *Catholic Christians*, carrying French flags and armed with modern guns *are looting villages* in the Province of Chili” (*The Writings of Mark Twain* 252). Twain’s choice to contrast the cheerful Christmas Eve message of the tribune with the other snippets, and to italicize the portions of the latter articles that he finds most offensive demonstrates his anger at the lie of American peace and goodness.

He indicts Reverend Ament, who has just returned from a trip where he forced the Chinese to pay for damages done by the Boxers, with backhanded

praise, saying that the nation is relieved to know that generally little looting was done by his men before the siege and that afterwards everyone behaved quite well “except when ‘circumstances’ crowded them” (*The Writings of Mark Twain* 253). His frustration with the actions cannot be separated from his anger at the reasons for which it was done. The supposed reason is compensation for damages, but when put down so plainly it would be difficult not to object to the idea that such money must be thirteen times the original number be collected from people who were not involved in the original crime. That so much of it went, not to the spreading of the Gospel, which was the ostensible reason for the mission, but instead into Ament’s own pockets makes the entire situation worse. Twain goes on to quote the *New York Tribune*’s Tokyo correspondent, who states in the strongest terms that religious expeditions into “Oriental” countries should cease.

It is then that Twain reaches the main part of his article, where he explores the question of whether America should continue to share its wealth of civilization and knowledge with the people who sit in the darkness of ignorance. And the fact that he asks whether such actions are right for America cannot be denied, despite his insistence above that no single person can write about the whole nation. When explaining facetiously that Reverend Ament is doing well, Twain insists that he represents “the American spirit” (*The Writings of Mark Twain* 252). When he explains that ‘we’ must consider if the sharing of enlightenment is still wise, that we refers to Americans, and when he suggests that “The Blessings of Civilization are all right, and a good commercial property; there could not be better, in a dim light” (*The Writings of Mark Twain* 256) but

that the people who used to be sitting in darkness are now beginning to look more closely at what they were really being sold and are beginning to find it wanting he is not condemning merely New York where most of the papers he references are based, but rather the nation. And that is the difficulty of the problem of American identity. Twain cannot escape that problem any more than Lewis or Melville could. Even when Americans do manage to conclude that they have no monolithic identity, as Twain does with his insistence that different parts of the country do not understand each other, he recognizes that the actions of the government and some large institutions define the whole. This is an inescapable truth.

Moreover, it is a frustrating truth. The need felt by so many writers (and others) to legitimize America in the eyes of the rest of the world is part of this problem. In Lewis, we see Dodsworth's impassioned defense of the nation to sneering Europeans. In Melville, it appears in Delano's carefully crafted American superiority to Cereno's European inferiority. And in Twain, in "To the Person Sitting in Darkness" and other essays, he expresses his anger with American imperialism as a representation of America's supposed ideals.

Twain's pointed use of vernacular speech is significant to consider here. His characters, with their less than "standard" English in their own vernaculars transformed American fiction. At the beginning of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Twain details the various dialects being used because "without it many readers would suppose that all these characters were trying to talk alike and not succeeding" (*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* Explanatory). This note makes it clear that not only are the speech patterns intentional, they are purposeful.

Specifically, it can be concluded that Twain chose to use such vernaculars to be authentic. Additionally, his care with giving different characters different variations on such dialects suggests quite clearly that there are textures and nuances that make Americans worth understanding.

In this case, the knowledge is specific to the region of America for which he himself is a “native novelist.” His versatility in presenting these verbal differences -- which refer to much more than language alone, but to mores and habit of thought -- underscore his conviction that these characters and their portraits fill a literary and cultural need. Even if the portraits are complicated, contradictory, infinitely changing portrait, Twain wants it to exist. When he says “when a thousand able novels have been written, *there* you have the soul of the people, the life of the people, the speech of the people, and not anywhere else can these be had” (“From The North American Review Mark Twain 1895” 127) we can grasp Twain’s panoramic, complex portrait.

In Twain’s dream lies the error in the notion that there is no American identity at all. The American identity, which can be found in the nation’s most cherished literature, is the question the authors cannot stop asking, even when they try. It is a search for the fundamental meanings that Melville sought in the sea, Lewis sought in rewriting his life and the America he observed into his novels, and Twain sought in his localized stories about the people he knew. The American identity is never singular, and in that lack of singularity the only identity Americans may have as a whole, frustrating as it may be to those wedded to writing “*the* Great American Novel.”

CONCLUSION

The search for an American identity preoccupied American writers from the early days of the nation just as surely as it preoccupied Bernard DeVoto. In a nation so carefully constructed, the world was curious about these Americans and its writers sought to define who they were. Writers from other nations attempted to understand the nation, writing explorations of America like French Hector St. John de Crevecoeur's *Letters From an American Farmer* (1782) which took the form of letters written by an American to a European explaining the nation and Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* (1835) which was intended to give Europeans an understanding of the rising ideals of democracy and liberty. Understanding the nation became an obsession of Americans just as much as of Europeans as they worked to legitimize their nation. This obsession turned authors like Mark Twain into idols, as Americans tried to forge a single American identity that could definitely say, "This is who we are." Herman Melville searched the ocean for the hidden truths of humanity, hoping to find the metaphorical America, just as European explorers found the physical America by crossing the sea. Decades later, Sinclair Lewis attempted to define an America he found frustrating in his novels, and trying, with difficulty, to bridge identities of proud Sauk Center native and critic of the Sauk Centers of the country. They, like

other Americans, could not escape the alluring idea that someone could find a unifying field theory of American identity.

In this context, DeVoto's intensity fits the importance of his subject. His frustration with Van Wyck Brooks' dismissal of American culture came from a conviction that Brooks was wrong. DeVoto insisted that America had a culture of its own, and that to suggest otherwise required ignorance. DeVoto accused Brooks of simultaneously claiming that America possessed no native life for its authors to express and that "writers who express our native life growing from native roots are at fault for not having produced a literature like that of England, France, or Russia" (DeVoto 38-9). In his anger at Brooks' desire for Americans to mimic European literature, DeVoto threw his support behind an America that was very different from Europe. In doing so he insisted that America's founding was predicated on the desire to be something other than European. DeVoto defended America just as Sam does in *Dodsworth* when he stands up to Braut's condemnation of the United States, showing that the obsession with American identity often finds Americans defending their existences to outsiders, and to their own insecure countrymen and women.

For DeVoto, true understanding of American identity requires honesty. Just as Twain satirized newspaper articles that declare all to be well while violence and war raged and found a character in Huck who sees the lies society tells him and ignores them in favor of the truths he discovers for himself, DeVoto mocks Brooks' inability or unwillingness to consider the realities of America's present and its past. For both men this insistence on truth and honesty originated

in concern about how the nation could become secure in its identity. Their concerns had implications for much more than just literature, too. Twain wanted to force Americans to confront the fact that there were criminals controlling parts of New York City (*The Writings of Mark Twain* 250), that American missionaries were extortionists, that innocent-faced American soldiers were committing atrocities in the Philippines (*The Writings of Mark Twain* 251), and that slavery went against all the morals Americans preached. Twain intended his writing to force his readers away from complacency, to force them to care about the world around them and to examine their own actions and those they supported. In his essay "To the Person Sitting in Darkness" he wanted the audience of the *North American Review*, to recognize their own blind spots and to care about injustice, particularly injustices allowed in their names or on their own soil. Twain wanted his pen to function as a catalyst for change in the early 20th century because he was unsatisfied with the state of national affairs at that time, and the attending platitudes about American morality and identity. Lewis' satire worked along similar lines, despite his belief -- and unlike Twain -- that America possessed a singular identity. When DeVoto objected to Brooks' version of America that painted the country as a dull, cultureless place, he wanted the nation to accept its failings and champion its successes in its relatively short life and history.

DeVoto cared about American identity because he cared about the potential that was yet to be discovered in America. In this way, he was just as Jefferson, just as Emerson, just as Lewis and Melville and Twain. The national project of a nation created for liberty and justice mattered to these men, and so

America mattered to them, and the identity that America claimed for itself mattered to them. However, just as Twain observed, no single person can understand or describe all that America is, the nation overflows with people whose experiences of America are literarily untapped. Despite this, even Twain, who recognized this diversity clearly sometimes addressed the nation as a whole, most particularly when he called on it to take a stand for justice. He might have wanted to assume that any in the diverse crowd of Americans would do the same thing.

That similar call rings throughout in Lewis' cautionary *It Can't Happen Here*. The concern with American identity means that potentially choosing the wrong path will be disastrous for the nation. As a result of the constant striving by the Lewises and the Twains and the Melvilles and even the DeVotos in the Gopher Prairies and Chicagos, on the shores of the Mississippi River, on the decks of whaling ships, and in the pages of literature America continued redefining itself. Our literature worries about American identity because authors believe they can change America and in doing so change its identity into something better. At the same time, authors defend it, insisting that it has a recognizable identity. American authors reflect the protean nature of American identity. In the process Americans, both authors and the rest of us, redefine the nation and its parts, as they have over and over since at least 1776. Because of this any definitions American authors create can never define everything about the nation, and even the definitions of its parts have short shelf lives. Despite this, American authors will very likely continue to care about American identity as

much as DeVoto did. They will continue to object to versions of it they dislike as much as he did, and the definitions they create will become as much a part of the history that forms the backdrop to any American 'now' as Lewis', Melville's, or Twain's. And that, perhaps, more even than Twain's ice cubes, gives the best definition of American identity: it is always changing, but America's writers are never far behind.

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