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What Lies Beyond – The Frontier and the Creation of the Monstrous

Space represents a crucial component in the process of analyzing and understanding literature and the various cultural implications that literature is more often than not exposed to. This is particularly true when the subject of the analysis is American literature whose origins, and its later development through the years, represent a constant interchanging and merging of numerous cultural and social values. The spatial aspect and its influence on American literary production constantly develops, much like the country and its literary focus, adapting to the ever-changing world. Therefore the aim of this analysis cannot be an attempt to provide an overview of the numerous instances of interaction that have taken and still are taking place between literature, or its authors, and the various notions and ideas of space as defined by disciplines such as human geography. Instead, what this particular analysis can do is to provide insight into a type of "space" both extremely specific to the American experience and in many ways a constant presence within numerous American creative processes. It is the concept of the "Frontier" that positions itself as a key notion that defines many aspects of both the American imaginary and the real, and which as the analysis will show, is not limited to a defined historical or cultural context, but instead functions as a continuous source of inspiration and national/personal introspection.

When discussing the actual Frontier, and the later development of the concept, it is necessary to view its historical purpose and function, and the actual geographic value that the Frontier once held. The early settlers observed it as a clearly defining and dividing line between the tamed nature and "civilized" surroundings of their settlements, and the vast wilderness which uncontrollably extended encircling the Puritan's "city on the hill". This actual physical encirclement indicated not only a space that could be mapped and defined, but combined with a rigid puritanical view of the world and the folklore inherited from Europe, it facilitated the creation of a fictitious "Other". As Roderic Nash in his analysis Wilderness and the American Mind suggests, the imagination of the

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Puritan settlers was haunted by the idea of a "pagan continent" (36). Such rhetoric, constantly emphasized by prominent figures such as Michael Wigglesworth or Cotton Mather, slowly but steadily evolved into a discourse of religiously fueled hate where the unconquered continent represented a space where "[…] Satan had seduced the first Indian inhabitants for the purpose of making a stronghold" (36). Such perception of the native population implied that they were all devil worshippers and therefore the wilderness that harbored such a population "[…] was never merely natural, never just a physical obstacle" (36). Over time this attitude influenced both the real world, where the Puritan rhetoric initiated a "crusader-like" movement, and the world of literature through which that same rhetoric was promoted perpetuating the imagery of a demonic "Other" existing on the other side of the frontier. Obviously such a division developed into two different strains of action, and although both "systems" shared the same purpose – to define and conquer the "threat" existing and identifying itself with the uncharted and unknown space, their later development and social roles differ greatly. The segment concerning the actual, geographical/spatial conquest manifested itself in countless conflicts between the native population and the settlers, gradually growing into an unstoppable conquering process which in turn led to the complete disappearance of the primary concept of the Frontier in 1890. The rhetoric backbone of this progress, together with the ideology that fueled the gradual advancement and conquering process, was largely defined by the historian Frederic Jackson Turner within his text "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" presented in 1893. Through his frontier thesis Turner suggests that the interaction with wilderness, together with the hardships and danger that such interaction included, provided the much needed basis for the formation and articulation of an American national identity (Whitfield 164). Those who interacted with the "frontier" by slowly conquering it, the explorers and the pioneers, all represented the genesis of the American positive individualism, which would be perpetuated later on ad absurdum. On the other hand, or more precisely on the other side, we find the native population, the Indians, as the main source of conflict. The issue here, according to Turner, is not the perception of the Indians as a threat as much as the "fact" of their "existential inferiority". Their "savage" ways serve as an additional confirmation of the cultural dominance and superiority of the white conquerors. What is interesting about this politically tainted reading of the interaction with the Frontier is the fact that the interacting individuals are perceived in a very positive way. Their interaction only further emphasizes their superiority and their virtues, indicating

the Frontier experience as something extremely positive. Later on the idea, or actually the rhetoric, will be embraced by President Kennedy in 1960 as a platform for his presidential campaign and the later involvement of the United States in the war of Vietnam, while the actual American Frontier will continue to exist only through the constantly perpetuated “mythology” of the Wild West.

Parallel to the historical development of the Frontier, and its re-interpretation through the imagery of the conquest of the Wild West, a different and more fictitious elaboration of this notion was slowly rooting itself into the American literary imaginarium. The structure of this parallel pseudo-mythological narrative coincides with the beginnings of American, or more precisely Puritan literature, where some of the basic fears and preoccupations dealing with the surrounding wilderness were being expressed. This type of literature was called “Indian captivity narratives” and it focused around the interaction between the local Puritan population and the untamed wilderness populated with a similarly untamed Indian population. According to Ruland and Bradbury this constant threat to the moral and social norms of civilization, together with the real or propagandized physical threat to the settlers, influenced the creation of a narrative dedicated exclusively to the description of the ordeals that the victims had to go through after being captured by the natives (27). Usually the stories included detailed accounts of individuals being tortured and then killed, or in some cases being forced to witness the torture, sexual abuse and killing of their companions. In most cases one member of the group would manage to escape being allowed in such a way to re-tell his or her gruesome experience. Such ideologically structured narratives did not offer various interpretations. The Indians, existing in a constant state of sin, were treated as demons, devils or beasts at best, symbolizing the constant Other permeating from the surrounding wilderness. The confirmation of this binary opposition comes from the description (and perception) of the Puritan settlers whose “rightful claim” on the land and the spreading of their religious teachings were being obstructed by the “blasphemous natives”.

A literary prototype of this notion, and a clear indication of possible future literary articulations, can be observed in the short story “An Account of a Beautiful Young Lady” written by an anonymous writer using the pseudonym Abraham Panther. The story narrates the unfortunate fate of a young girl after running away from her father, who opposes her relationship with a young clerk. By deciding to run away she is forced to face the wilderness and the unthinkable violence that lies

there. Already from its beginning it becomes clear that the author structures the narrative according to the customs of the European Gothic tradition. Nevertheless there is one crucial difference and that is the issue of setting and space. The gloomy settings of European castles, monasteries and abandoned churchyards are now being replaced by a distinctly American wilderness, carrying in itself a completely new symbolic value. At first the attitude of the young girl is that of a typical Gothic heroine. Facing an (in)direct threat of a dominant male figure, in this case her controlling father, the girl is compelled to escape, "aided" by her fiance[1] . From this point on the narrative starts deviating from what could be considered a usual Gothic development. One of the first and most defining features is the introduction of the idea of a frontier clearly dividing the safe space from the threatening wilderness. Almost immediately the young couple is attacked by a group of Indians ending their escape and potential happiness with a savage act of violence.

Towards the evening of the fourth day we were surrounded and made prisoners by a party of Indians who led us about two miles and then barbarously murdered my lover, cutting and mangling him in the most inhuman manner. Then, after tying him to a stake, they kindled a fire round him and, while he burnt, they ran round, singing and dancing, rejoicing in their brutal cruelty. (Crow ed. 5)

The young heroine manages to escape only to continue wondering deeper into the wilderness for the following fourteen days. On the fifteenth day she encounters a "gigantic" man and she is captured again and taken to his cave. Aware that she will be sexually abused the day after, she once again manages to break free but this time, instead of running, she decides to face her fears and her captor. It is precisely this point of the narrative that shows the ambivalent nature of the Frontier as a space that functions not only as a setting outside of civilized norms but also as a direct influence on the individuals who are exposed to it. The heroine in this case, as opposed to her numerous "classic" European predecessors faces her oppressor not only with bravery but also with an uncanny brutality. Supposedly changed by her previous experiences with the Indians and the harsh wilderness, she decides to kill her captor with the use of a hatchet. With three blows she "[…] effectively put an end to his existence […]" but instead of being satisfied with the ghastly result she also cut off his head, and then the following day "[…] cut him in quarters […] and then […]

drew him out of the cave about half a mile of distance […](6). After the deed she returns to the cave where she remains until her rescue by a group of explorers nine years later.

Similar examples can be observed in a number of early American texts. Reaching for a more mainstream literary production we can find authors such as Nathaniel Hawthorne or Washington Irving, whose texts, although exemplary within the context of American Romanticism, indicate a strong sense of uncertainty regarding the dichotomic nature of the Frontier. Although the uncivilized side of the dividing line is no longer populated by a an Indian threat, the "Other" created as an opposition to the "civilized" white settlers, the ambiguity of the undiscovered, or perhaps the "ungraspable" space lying beyond the known borders clearly positions itself as a relevant imaginative resource. The appeal of such a spatial construct can once again be traced to the European gothic tradition, more precisely to the gradual reinforcement of the role of space within gothic narratives. Starting with The Castle of Otranto (1764), considered to be the first gothic novel, space is being defined by perpetually claustrophobic architecture whose purpose is not only to serve as an adequate setting for a specific narrative, but also to externalize and suggest fear and helplessness present in the characters who inhabit this type of space. Furthermore the gothic topography, although populated by clearly defined castles, monasteries or subterranean vaults, constantly eludes definition allowing only a distorted perception and slippage between the real and the surreal or supernatural. This issue of the "map", or more precisely its failure and the inability to determine the boundaries of gothic space, is something that persists as a dominant feature of the gothic genre. With the American literary evolution in the 19th century and the gradual distancing from its European heritage it is the Frontier, or what lies on its other side, that which becomes the new abstract site and source of anxiety and fear. Going back to Hawthorne the issue of space is closely interwoven with transgression. Placing aside the Puritan heritage embedded in works such as The Scarlett Letter where the boundaries are placed within the metaphoric structure of society, Hawthorne still succeeds in presenting the iconic function of the forest as a locus of fear and transgression. An example of this can be seen in his short story "Young Goodman Brown" where the main character is starting a rather obscure journey at sunset, from the (in)famous Salem village into the forest where a cultist/satanic gathering is to take place. Almost immediately the description of the surroundings leaves no option as far as the interpretative possibilities are concerned. The

path leading to the forest and its later descriptions create a dark and menacing setting in concordance with the nature of Young Goodman Brown's purpose. Frightened by the wilderness and the chance of a "[…] devilish Indian behind every tree […]" (Crow ed. 113), he pushes deeper into the forest encountering the Devil himself and numerous esteemed members of the community all headed towards the gathering location. Simultaneously Brown's spouse Faith, apparently innocent and safe in the village, does in fact join the blasphemous congregation, and this will in turn push Goodman Brown over the metaphoric "edge" exposing him to not only the reality of the depraved society surrounding him, but also to the symbolic merging of what lies beyond the Frontier with his own surroundings. An argument could be made that Hawthorne in this case eluded the almost traditional positioning of women characters within a gothic heroine role. As opposed to the "An Account of a Beautiful Young Lady" and various similar stories that followed where female characters are the central subject to various misadventures, Hawthorne uses a male character as the key figure. It is Young Goodman Brown that is lured and tempted by the Devil himself, but it is Faith that in fact succumbs to the allure of evil lurking in the wilderness. The other side of the metaphoric Frontier is therefore not only an inherently negative space but it is in fact a space that harbors and instigates negative behavior, or at least the shedding of social and moral norms which is in turn something closely connected to the puritan perception of the Indian population. Faith therefore becomes corrupted even before Brown's temptation, allowing the reader in such way to observe not the moral/behavioral decline of the main character as much as the doppelganger effect and the corruption of society as a whole. Nevertheless Brown is also affected. His interaction with the "other side" leaves him "[…] a sad, a darkly meditative, a distrustful, if not a desperate man […]" (Crow ed. 120), a state he will remain in until the day of his death.

A third narrative segment belonging to a more contemporary literary production but still relevant when discussing the issue of the Frontier is the literary production dedicated to the American experience in Vietnam. Building on the "classic" system of values proclaimed and reinforced by Kennedy before the actual engagement of American troops on Vietnam soil, the literature that came out of this experience is strongly influenced by the spatial division, which in turn created an uncertain division between the "civilized" and the "wild". Using Western imagery together with the

media propaganda of the period mostly promoted by various Hollywood productions the Vietnamese soldiers are characterized as “Indians” while the American troops are “cowboys”. This simple division instigated by a very successful propaganda program provided the necessary boundaries for the American public. Simultaneously the American writers of the period, both soldiers such as Philip Caputo or Tim O’Brien who kept journals, later to be fictionalized and adapted to literary forms ranging from novels to shorts stories, or actual journalists such as Michael Herr and their subjective experience channeled through the form of New Journalism, observed the American involvement as something not uniquely good and positive. Through their writings a distinct feeling of “opposition” is being emphasized, but the opposing sides are not the same as propagandized by the mainstream information channels. Instead of fighting the enemy, the American soldiers, exposed to a different type of war - the wilderness, the brutal guerilla type of war on one side, and the ineffectual military structure constantly questioned and criticized by the public eye on the other - leaves the soldiers to the mercy of their own judgments and the subsequent consequences. The Frontier once again plays an important role in the process of character development or more precisely a crucial role in the slow but definite regression of the characters to a more primordial state.

The fact that most narratives have soldiers as main protagonists decreases the metamorphic effect that the characters are subject to. In light of this, one particular story adequately summarizes the trauma and the subsequent creation of a different identity and “otherness” induced by the act of crossing the boundaries (spatial or otherwise). Tim O’Brien in his short story entitled “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong” combines various narrative and social elements in creating an account about the experience and the later “transformation” of a female character stereotype. Combining the tendency for the deconstruction of the image of a woman coming out of the feminist movement of the 60's, with an homage to Conrad’s Heart of Darkness and the almost absolute value and importance of violence within the context of the Vietnam conflict, O’Brien creates a narrative through which the reader is able to observe the gradual change that a female character is subject to when placed next to and beyond the Frontier. The story develops around Mary Anne Bell, a young American girl invited by her boyfriend Mark Fossie to join him at a military base in Vietnam. The young couple, sure about their future and the ultimate realization of the “American dream”,

starts living on a small base together with some other soldier assigned there, and a small group of Green Berets. Mary Anne Bell, at first presented as "[…] the quintessence of American femininity as defined in 1960s mainstream culture […]" (Bates 155) with her blonde hair and blue eyes, slowly starts interacting with the local population. At first she acts only as a tourist, but then, due to her curiosity and willingness to learn and experience new things she start helping out the troops as a nurse and then finally after some time she slowly becomes one of them – a soldier. Parallel to her "evolution" her attachment to her boyfriend slowly fades. Instead of fulfilling the planned "American dream" Fossie is forced to observe the regression of his girlfriend to an almost primitive state. Her identification and indoctrination with the war, articulated mostly through her interaction with the Green Berets – troops whose almost exclusive purpose was to serve as a connecting point between the "wilderness" of Vietnam and the "civilized" America, in time ceases to be a product of curiosity and becomes an existential paradigm that defines the entire narrative. This evolution induced by a careless exposure to war and the explicitness that defines the "other side", causes the metamorphosis of a young and innocent American girl into an extremely dedicated and capable killer completely at ease with her violent surroundings. The issue of the girl being at the center of the narrative stresses the transformative process even more. As Bates states, Mary Anne's transformation usurps the "traditional gender polarity" (156) allowing in such way Mary Anne to become a dominant figure symbolizing the feminist uprising in the 60s. But as the story develops she transcends the notion of gender altogether becoming, through her interaction with wilderness, the war, and the act of killing, a projection of an ideal American soldier/conqueror of the "New Frontier" which equally defies the enemy and the "normal" American soldiers. The merciless fighting conditions in Vietnam, together with the almost mystical quality of the jungle wilderness forces Mary Anne to completely reject her personal moral and social values and to become a self-sufficient assassin. The climax of the story describes a final confrontation between Fossie and Mary Anne. Trying to find her, Fossie enters the Green Beret quarters, where from a shadowy corner of a room filled with candles, bones, the scent of burnt hair, blood, rotting meat and the "stink of the kill" (O'Brien 110) Mary Anne emerges. For a brief moment she appears as she was before – an innocent girl dressed in a pink sweater, white blouse and a simple cotton shirt (110), with "utterly flat and indifferent" (110) eyes. The only thing marking her experience and the consequent profound change is her "jewelry" – "At the girl's throat was a necklace of human

tongues. Elongated and narrow, like pieces of blackened leather, the tongues were threaded along a length of copper wire, one overlapping the next, the tips curled upward as if caught in a final shrill syllable" (110-111).

As stated by Bates, there is a clear connection between this story and Conrad's Heart of Darkness, or more precisely between the character of Mary Anne and Kurtz achieved through their venturing into the unexplored wilderness and being changed by it (156). Simultaneously the two characters are also completely different since Mary Anne, as opposed to Kurtz, does not remain within any type of social boundaries. Mary Anne's "coitus" with the "Other" side is so dramatic that her identification with Vietnam is not desertion and the acceptance of the enemy. Instead she becomes equally dangerous for the VC and the NVA as she is for the American soldiers, confirming in such a way the indiscriminate consequences of the Frontier experience. After a brief interaction with her former boyfriend she disappears once again transcending into the mythology of the land – "She was part of the land. She was wearing her culottes, her pink sweater, and a necklace of human tongues. She was dangerous. She was ready for the kill" (116).

It would be impossible to provide a definite answer to the relationship between space and literature, especially when discussing the interaction between the American Frontier mythology and the literary opus inspired by it. What can clearly be stated and traced is the actual existence of a nexus of space and experience diachronically articulated in numerous narratives. Such emphasis on this relation and its reinterpretation within mainstream and non-mainstream culture, together with an almost constant depiction of the "other" untamed or undiscovered space indicates an ongoing national anxiety and preoccupation. Literature in this case, regardless of the historical period it belongs to, serves as a conduit undoubtedly pinpointing individual, cultural or social changes and traumas.

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[1] In a „classic“ European Gothic text the fiancé would be replaced by a young knight figure ready to sacrifice himself for the benefit of the heroine.



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