

TERRITORIAL EXPANSION IN AMERICAN LITERATURE AND ART: CAN AMERICANS TRULY CONQUER NATURE?

Kimberly A. Earley

John L. O'Sullivan first spoke of America's manifest destiny in 1839 as he sought to promote the expansion of America. He declares, "The expansive future is our arena, and for our history. We are entering on its untrodden space, with the truths of God in our minds, beneficent objects in our hearts, and with a clear conscience unsullied by the past." In this doctrine, O'Sullivan rhetorically questions, "Who will, what can, set limits to our onward march?" (par. 6). O'Sullivan expects Americans to yell, "Nothing" and pack their bags for uncharted territory, and many do. However, in his attempt to motivate Western expansion, O'Sullivan treats the move onto the "untrodden land" as if it can be done easily if Americans have the right intentions. However, as Americans move to this primitive environment, they must engage in external conflicts with the landscape, animals, and natives. Unlike O'Sullivan's doctrine *Manifest Destiny*, romantic artists and writers like Thomas Cole and Nathaniel Hawthorne depict nature as a stark primeval forest that is difficult to inhabit. Caroline Kirkland in her work *A New Home, Who'll Follow?* initially struggles against the wilderness of Michigan because almost every aspect of frontier life is unknown to her. As Washington Irving and W. B. Thorpe discuss, to survive against these struggles, mankind often tries to conquer nature. However, to writers like Cole, Hawthorne, Kirkland, and Thorpe, nature eventually becomes the ideal home. Although the American writers of this period depict the primitive, harsh realities of nature, they also offer alternative histories that romanticize nature. As a result, these writers raise nature to an awe-inspiring force that mankind is incapable of truly conquering as he moves across the West.

As American writers and artists look to the West, they depict nature as a powerful, untamed force. Cole, one of the first artists of the Hudson River Series, emphasizes the awesome power of nature. In his work "Storm King of the Hudson," Cole represents the starkness of nature. The absence of humans and animals in this painting emphasizes this bleak representation of the wilderness. In addition, his harsh brushstrokes of the trees and grass make nature seem untamed and wild. Yet, there is a path to the left that shows mankind is not completely absent from this depiction of nature. Along this path, however, there is a treacherous black hole in the center of the painting, which seems to suggest that man must walk carefully in this newly discovered land. As the storm clouds at the center of the painting show, nature has the power to create a disturbance for mankind. It would be scary to step off and try to tame this world. If Cole's painting do contain any human beings, he depicts them as miniscule in contrast to the awesome cliff walls, towering trees, and enormous clouds. In his painting "The Last of the Mohicans," the grandeur of nature dwarfs the small circle of Native Americans. Nature's grandeur suggests mankind has stepped foot into the "untrodden space" of Natty Bumppo's America, but nature's stark wilderness is still not chartered territory for mankind. Although mankind is sometimes present in Cole's art work, he certainly does not depict nature as if mankind has or even can conquer nature.

The wild forest that Cole paints in his artwork is similar to Nathaniel Hawthorne's description of the heathen forest. Although Hawthorne is writing about the Puritan settlement of New England, his descriptions of the wilderness in *The Scarlet Letter* are relevant to the movement West. He uses Boston's setting in the 17th century to establish a border between the settled land and the "untamed forest" (154). In "The Custom House," Hawthorne narrates how his own family "made [its] appearance in the wild and forest-bordered settlement, which has since become a city" (5). Similarly, he places Hester's story "on this roughly hewn street of a little town, on the edge of the Western wilderness" (43). His selection of a town that borders the Western wilderness establishes a dividing line between nature and the town. In direct contrast to the laws of Puritan society, he depicts the wilderness that borders Boston as "the wild, heathen Nature of the forest, never subjugated by human law" (157). He further establishes the wilderness as an untamed area that is not fit for the "civilized" Puritans. Instead, those who seek freedom or an alternative history from the mainstream or official history turn to the wilderness. To the Puritans, the "untamed forest" is a symbol of evil as it is the place where Mistress Hibbons, who represents the most alternative history in *The Scarlet Letter*, calls home (154). Hester Prynne and Pearl turn to this wilderness as a place of freedom from the harsh confines of Puritan laws and society; however, they never choose to inhabit it. This land still seems too uncivilized, even for Hester. In Hawthorne's text, Americans have not made their move to the West, but one can assume that he intends the border of Boston and the wilderness to also represent the border that his contemporaries face as they look to the West during the 19th century. Hawthorne's wilderness represents the primeval forest that later adventurers, like Caroline Kirkland, will try to make their home.

Caroline Kirkland, one of the few voices of women on the frontier, presents nature more as an unknown entity rather than the heathen wilderness that Hawthorne and Cole depict. Instead, Kirkland writes about her daily life experiences as she tries to domesticate certain aspects of nature in Michigan. In her preface to *A New Home: Who'll Follow*, Kirkland writes about her "adventurous journeyings and tarryings beyond the confines of civilization" (3). In this preface, she also claims to tell the truth about the difficulties that women face as they try to be domestic in the wilderness, the state of the Michigan roads with their enormous pot holes, and the uncivilized behavior of the "natives." In her descriptions, Kirkland often represents nature as an unknown that she learns about as she encounters it for the first time. She readily admits at the beginning of her travel narrative that when she first "'penetrated the interior' (to use an indigenous phrase) all [she] knew of the wilds was from Hoffman's tour of Captain Hall's 'graphic' delineations" (5-6). Her use of the word *penetrated* here suggests that nature is a barrier that mankind must cross. Her ignorance of the land, except for her knowledge of what is represented on a map, also suggests that the land she is moving to is unknown, especially to a woman from the "civilized" East. When a party of breakfast-table companions gathers to make a "tour with a view to the purchase of one or two cities," (21), Kirkland chronicles the difficulties these individuals have as they try to acquire more land. Because they are new settlers who are accustomed to city life, Kirkland comments, "The following of a trail by star-light is an exercise of skill and patience not likely to be long agreeable to gentlemen who have been for

many years accustomed to pavements and gas-lamps" (22). Because these gentlemen do not know how to use nature as a tool, they often struggle as they travel to seek out new land. They cannot read the signs in nature. Even the seemingly well-known duties of preparing her children for the day are unknown to Kirkland in the wilderness. The first time she tries to carry out her "ordinary nursery routine, in a log-hut, without a servant, and with a skillet for a wash-basin" she declares that it "was the first and last time I ever attempted to carry through" her previous Eastern morning routine (31). Instead, she seeks out a new method, which is continually necessary in this new land. So although Kirkland is not presenting the forest as a place of darkness or extreme wildness, she definitely depicts it as an unknown entity to those who are coming from the East.

Thorpe, on the other hand, uses a character that is knowledgeable about the wilderness to show its primitiveness. Although Thorpe deals with the primitiveness of nature in a humorous manner, he also sends a message to his reader that nature is a difficult place to make a home. In "The Big Bear of Arkansas," Thorpe emphasizes Arkansas's primitiveness by calling it the "creation State" (1782). This term suggests that this land is still in its original, wild form. As Thorpe suggests, in order to tame it, one must tend to it at all times. Jim Doggett experiences difficulties taming the wilderness when he plants beets and potatoes. At first, Doggett's efforts to cultivate nature are very successful. He tells his readers:

You can't preserve anything natural you plant in it, unless you pick it young, things that will grow out of shape so quick. I once planted in those diggings a few potatoes and beets, they took a fine start, and after that an ox team couldn't have kept them from growing. About that time I went off to old Kentuck on business, and did not hear from them things in three months. (1784)

However, Doggett cannot keep the growth of his plants under control because he does not stay at the planting site. As a result, his "crop was overgrown and useless" (1784). Doggett is not able to tame nature, and it grows out of control. He argues that the "sile is too rich, and *planting in Arkansas is dangerous*" (1784). Doggett's unsuccessful planting represents humans' attempts to control nature as they push into the frontier. His use of the word *dangerous* here points to the power of nature that is present in other works in this time period such as Cole's "A Storm King of the Hudson" or Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*.

But Thorpe takes this conflict with nature one step further than Cole's stark landscapes or Hawthorne's untamed forest. Doggett actually calls nature his home. Because he lives in nature, he often represents mankind's struggle to conquer nature during America's attempt to civilize the West. Because he has manmade technology, like his gun, he, at times, seems as if he is winning in his battle against nature. In his hyperbolized description of his reputation as a bear hunter, Doggett argues, "the old black rascals know the crack of my gun as well as they know a pig's squealing. They grow thin in our parts, it frightens them so, they do take the noise dreadfully, poor things" (1782). His gun creates a "perfect epidemic among bar" (1782). Thorpe uses Doggett's exaggeration of his strong hunting skills and his description of the decrease

in bears to demonstrate how Americans often during this period believe that they need to wipe out nature in order to civilize it. Because of his fear of the primeval forest in places like Arkansas, mankind often looks to conquer nature with his technology or his knowledge of cultivation.

Washington Irving in *Knickerbocker's History of New York, Complete* also criticizes America's desire to conquer nature as a means of civilizing it for habitation. Although the focus of chapter five is to satirize the Europeans' treatment of the Native Americans during the settlement of the new land, he also ridicules America's belief in a "right to discovery" that seems to set the stage for the doctrine of America's manifest destiny. Much like Thorpe's discussion of planting, Irving discusses the "cultivation of the soil." However, he ridicules the earliest Americans' beliefs in soil cultivation:

The cultivation of the soil, we are told, is an obligation imposed by nature on mankind. The whole world is appointed for the nourishment of its inhabitants; but it would be incapable of doing it, was it uncultivated. Every nation is then obliged by the law of nature to cultivate the ground that has fallen to its share. (60)

Irving inverts the roles of nature and mankind here so that the laws of nature require that mankind cultivates it. However, Irving clearly creates this inversion to show how Americans believe that it is their destiny to cultivate the land. He takes this satirical point one step further by saying, "It has been most unquestionably shown that Heaven intended the earth should be ploughed, and sown, and manured, and laid out into cities, and towns, and farms, and country seats, and pleasure grounds, and public gardens. . ." (60). In this list Irving points to the inevitable progression of the wilderness to a civilized society that views nature through manmade public gardens and pleasure grounds. Even at this early point in the 19th century, writers like Irving and Thorpe are keenly aware of mankind's desire to conquer nature so that he may live in a civilized society on newly discovered territory.

But in their discussions of territorial acquisition, the writers during this time period emphasize that nature is so powerful that mankind cannot truly conquer it. Instead, a number of writers in this period romanticize nature and raise it above the status of mankind. As previously mentioned, Cole's representation of mankind is always miniscule compared to the size of the surrounding elements of nature. This, too, suggests that nature is not only the focus of the painting, but it is more powerful than the human beings within it. In "Storm King of the Hudson," Cole not only shows the primeval forest but also the sublime of nature. In the center of this painting, there is a white cloud with rays of light shining through the middle. The light source comes from the top of the painting, which suggests that the divine is at work in nature. Because of this suggestion of the divine in this painting, Cole depicts a mystery in nature that is above mankind's understanding.

Hawthorne also raises nature above mankind's understanding, particularly in the forest scenes in chapters fifteen through seventeen of *The Scarlet Letter*. In these scenes, Hawthorne repeatedly emphasizes nature's mystery, especially in his descriptions of the brook. He personifies the brook so that it has a higher knowledge that mankind

can't understand. As wild Pearl plays nearby, "The little stream. . . still kept telling its unintelligible secret of some very mournful mystery that had happened—or making a prophetic lamentation about something that was yet to happen—within the verge of the dismal forest" (144). Hawthorne uses the word *unintelligible* to place nature's knowledge above mankind's understanding. Humans, except maybe wild Pearl, cannot read the story that nature has to tell. Hawthorne also uses the word *prophetic* to suggest that nature has the power to see what Americans will do to the wilderness as they move to the West. Hawthorne continues to emphasize the superior knowledge and mystery of nature as he directly compares Pearl to the brook: "Pearl resembled the brook, inasmuch as the current of her life gushed from a well-spring as mysterious, and had flowed through scenes shadowed as heavily with gloom" (143). Pearl, like the brook, has a story that is riddled with mystery. At the beginning of the text, Chillingworth, the town officials, and the citizens do not know who Pearl's father is. As Hawthorne creates this romanticized view of nature's prophetic knowledge, he shows that there are aspects of nature that mankind will never understand; therefore, nature will always have a sort of secretive story that mankind cannot overcome.

Although Hawthorne depicts the forest as a wild entity that is not ruled by any human authority, he establishes nature as having the power to endure the disturbances of mankind. Hawthorne portrays the wilderness as the ideal that is free of civilization. When he first introduces nature in the opening paragraphs of *The Scarlet Letter*, he describes in detail a beautiful rosebush that grows in contrast to the prison door:

This rose-bush, by a strange chance, has been kept alive in history; but whether it had merely survived out of the stern old wilderness, so long after the fall of the gigantic pines and oaks that originally over-shadowed it,—or whether, as there is fair authority for believing, it had sprung up under the footsteps of the sainted Anne Hutchinson, as she entered the prison-door. (35-36)

Although Hawthorne never declares the true meaning of his symbol, he seems to suggest that nature, as represented by the rosebush, will continue to grow even as mankind inhabits it and establishes human laws and punishments. But Hawthorne suggests that nature has an innate power to survive throughout history, even when mankind settles it. This romanticism of nature sets the stage for mankind to exist in nature in the 19th century.

Although Thorpe's Doggett tries to conquer nature, he ultimately ends with a discussion of its mysteries, which mankind is not capable of comprehending. Thorpe uses the chase of an "unhunting" bear as his means of romanticizing nature. But this bear is so difficult to capture that it becomes a symbol of nature's wildness that is difficult for mankind to overcome. It is so challenging that Doggett feels like:

missing that bar so often, took hold of [his] vitals, and [he] wasted away. The thing had been carried too far, and it reduced [him] in flesh faster than an ager. [He] would see that bar in everything [he] did,—*be hunted [him]*, and that, too, like a devil, which [he] began to think he was. (1786)

When Doggett finally thinks he shoots bear, he swims to the island to retrieve it. Instead of discovering the great bear he thinks he has killed, he finds that he has killed a female bear. He narrates in disbelief, "Stranger, may I be chewed to death by young alligators, if the thing I looked at wasn't a *she* bar, and not the old critter at all" (1787). Doggett's narration suggests that he is in disbelief; something happens in the hunt of the bear that he cannot understand. By the end of his tall tale, he further romanticizes nature when he thinks he shoots the bear, but he finds that the bear merely dies on his lawn. Big Bear says, "My private opinion is that that bar was *an unhuntable bar, and died when his time come*" (1788). By the end, he actually describes the bear as the "creation bar" (1788). His diction here suggests the same idea as his use of the term "creation State." In other words, this bear is a representation of nature in its primeval form, which suggests a mysterious quality of nature. Doggett even says, "There was something curious about it, I could never understand,--and I never was satisfied at his giving in so easy at last (1788). Thorpe further emphasizes the mystery of nature when the narration changes back to the outer frame of the story and the gentle narrator on the steamship says, "I saw there was a mystery to him connected with the bear whose death he had just related, that had evidently made a strong impression on his mind" (1788). And in a sense, when the bear that Doggett is hunting dies, he makes "a bed spread of his skin" (1788). Although Jim uses the bear rug, he is not successful in conquering nature; instead, he romanticizes nature in his narration and consequently highlights that nature has a mysterious quality that mankind will never truly comprehend or conquer.

Similarly, Kirkland also romanticizes nature; however, she does not place nature above mankind in her understanding of it. Kirkland instead claims that mankind has a direct relationship with nature. As Kirkland assimilates into her new life as a woman of the frontier, she finds that nature has a number of "many redeeming points even in the half-wild state at first so uncongenial" (118). Unlike the unintelligible nature that Hawthorne presents in *The Scarlet Letter*, Kirkland argues that nature is like "an old acquaintance with unaltered looks" (118). In other words, when nature presents something new to the frontiersmen, these individuals can understand it because nature's characteristics seem to be like the visage of an old friend who has not changed over the years. She also seems to argue that if mankind listens to nature, he will realize that "they speak always the same well-known tongue" (118). Because mankind has the capacity to understand nature as he would an old friend, Kirkland, at the end of her text, no longer depicts nature as an unknown. She also does not represent nature as an entity above mankind; instead she argues, "There is that constant and mutual harmony among all her works—one undivided spirit pervading them throughout" (118). But she is still romanticizing nature. For Kirkland, "Nature is the universal home" that mankind is not conquering but living with communally (118).

By the end of these texts, the main characters feel at home in nature. Caroline Kirkland declares, "I am now a denizen of the wild woods—in my view, 'no mean city' to own as one's home" (148). Although Thorpe's Doggett is the typical male voice of the wilderness, he seeks an alternative history to the other individuals on the steamship because he hopes to make his home in the uncivilized territory of Arkansas. Eventually, the paintings in the Hudson River Series become more populated with

illustrations of mankind in nature. And Americans do succeed in O'Sullivan's desire to progress across the county; however, they do not completely conquer nature in their land acquisition. In "The Big Bear of Arkansas" the narrator's description of Jim Doggett's bear hunt can be nicely applied to America's progression to the West: "It was also evident that there was some superstitious awe connected with the affair,--a feeling common with all 'children of the wood,' when they meet with any thing out of their every day experience" (Thorpe 1788). The writers, artists, and frontiersmen of the early 19th century are certainly "children of the wood" who recognize nature's supremacy. Throughout the changes of America's expansion, their romantic representations of nature's mystery and power remind America that nature cannot be completely conquered. In order to survive in this new wilderness, mankind recognizes that the awe-inspiring characteristics of nature should be revered in America's literature and art.

Works Cited

- Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Scarlet Letter*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1850.
- Hudson River School Artists. Paintings. Desmond-Fish Library
<http://dfh.highlands.com/DFL_Painters/Index.html>.
- Irving, Washington. *Knickerbocker's History of New York, Complete*. 1809. Project Gutenberg. <<http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/13042>>.
- O'Sullivan, John. John L. O'Sullivan on *Manifest Destiny, 1839*. Mount Holyoke College. <<http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/osulliva.htm>>.
- Thorpe, T.B. "The Big Bear of Arkansas." *The Norton Anthology of American Literature, Volume B*. New York: Norton, 1780-1788.

Early American Literature
American literature begins with the orally transmitted myths, legends, tales, and lyrics (always songs) of Indian cultures. There was no written literature among the more than 500 different Indian languages and tribal cultures that existed in North America before the first Europeans arrived. Nature is alive and endowed with spiritual forces; main characters may be animals or plants, often totems associated with a tribe, group, or individual.

Early American Literature
Examples of almost every oral genre can be found in American Indian literature: lyrics, chants, myths, fairy tales, humorous anecdotes, incantations, riddles, proverbs, epics, and legendary histories. Accounts of migrations and ancestors abound, as do vision or healing songs and tricksters' tales. For trails in the American Old West, see Westward Expansion Trails. Evolution of the borders of the United States of America. Animated map of the territorial evolution of the United States (click to view full size image). Census Bureau map depicting territorial acquisitions and dates of statehood, probably created in the 1970s. The United States of America was created on July 4, 1776, with the Declaration of Independence of thirteen British colonies in North America. In the Lee Resolution of July 2, 1776, the colonies resolved that they were free and independent states. The union was formalized in the Articles of Confederation, which came into force on March 1, 1781, after being ratified by all 13 states. American literature does not easily lend itself to classification by time period. Given the size of the United States and its varied population, there are often several literary movements happening at the same time. However, this hasn't stopped literary scholars from making an attempt. The majority of writings were historical, practical, or religious in nature. Some writers not to miss from this period include Phillis Wheatley, Cotton Mather, William Bradford, Anne Bradstreet, and John Winthrop. This era in American literature is responsible for notable first works, such as the first American comedy written for the stage—"The Contrast" by Royall Tyler, written in 1787—and the first American Novel—"The Power of Sympathy" by William Hill, written in 1789.