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0521335329 - Equivocal Endings in Classic American Novels: The Scarlet Letter;  
Adventures of Huckleberry Finn; The Ambassadors; The Great Gatsby

Joyce A. Rowe

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Introduction

### I

To the passionate reader, the ending of a good story is a mixed blessing. For though we demand endings to confirm or complete our sense of relations within a story and so make a work fully signify, an ending, like its real life counterpart, also entails a sense of loss, of emptiness – a little death, as it were. In this sense, fictional endings, whatever their ostensible resolution, are inherently equivocal. In fulfilling our desire for a world of “charged meanings” and singular events they recapitulate the wisdom of Prospero – reminding us that the meaning we seek is a vision we impose; that our finest aspirations are generated from the “baseless [and varied] fabric” of our dreams.<sup>1</sup>

Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* is associated with the Elizabethan voyages to the New World and the utopian ideals rekindled by its discovery.<sup>2</sup> But when Prospero breaks his staff, resigns his powers, and returns to the world of the Renaissance state, he confirms his audience (and their English descendants) in a more restrictive sense of human possibility, and reality, than that which their American cousins were to evolve on their side of the Atlantic ocean. For despite cross-currents and interpenetrating influences between the two continents, by the mid-nineteenth century when, it is generally recognized, American writers had found their own style and voice, their formal as well as thematic concerns were generating a decidedly different literature from that produced by comparable writers abroad.

Nowhere, perhaps, is this more evident than in the pattern of the endings of classic American novels and their troubling relation to the narrative which precedes them. These endings are equivocal in a special thematic sense, as they simultaneously promote and deny a visionary ambition already defeated in the body of the work. Neither tragic, comic nor ironic, they are, rather deliberately evasive, eluding those truths of experience, of both self and world, which the preceding narrative has been at pains

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

### Equivocal Endings in Classic American Novels

to establish. What is most telling about this pattern is that it can be shown to persist in works which represent disparate styles and genres – works which were written both pre- and post-Civil War, and which thus span a paradigmatic historical era in which Americans were absorbing, at an unprecedented rate, social, economic, and political changes. These changes, one might think, would radically redefine the experience of what it means to be an American. Yet the thematic and structural consistency in these books suggests otherwise. At the deepest level, there seems to be no significant alteration in the conceptual pattern by which our major artists have perceived and interpreted our culture's dominant themes.

Each of these works is focussed on a protagonist whose visionary longings separate him or her from direct engagement with common social experience. Regularly figured as a society *à deux*, a bond of ideal love or brotherhood which can only exist outside the given social order, the protagonist's vision challenges a morally inadequate reality which, nevertheless, consumes his or her attention as it stimulates his or her resistance. In the course of the tale, the idealist is defeated, as much by his or her own limitations as by the society at hand. Yet these endings all adhere to a similar convention: they redeem or rehabilitate the ideal by recasting it in alternative terms. However equivocally it is stated, the protagonist refuses either to reconsider or to abandon visionary hope. In effect, he or she refuses to learn anything about self or world from the experiences undergone in the course of the story. Why this should be – and what species of narrative logic or illogic allows the reader to share in the affect of these endings, making plausible or convincing what, empirically, ought to be neither – will be the main theme of this book. Once formulated, these issues inevitably suggest the pressure of a cultural imperative to which both writer and reader are subtly bound.

In recent decades a good deal of critical attention has been devoted to the subject of literary endings. It is clear that the convention, in its varied guises, embodies deeply felt human needs. Frank Kermode has related the endings in Western literary tradition to the great apocalyptic paradigms of Judaeo-Christian culture. He finds that these types continue to “underlie ways of making sense of the world from where we stand, in the midst.”<sup>3</sup> Other critical studies have examined forms of the ending in rela-

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Introduction

tion to unresolved tensions generated within an individual work, within the consciousness of an individual character, or as a structural key to retrospective interpretation of the whole text.<sup>4</sup>

While each of these studies offers valuable insights into a complex subject, my own interest lies in the question of how a particular culture adapts and defines traditional expressive patterns to its own needs and purposes. I want to state at the outset what may appear as a truism to some readers, but which, perhaps for this reason, is often ignored in practice by literary specialists and educated readers alike. This is the recognition that writers are, like the rest of us, inevitably shaped by those forms of thought and feeling, and modes of interpreting experience, which constitute the outline of what we have come to define as a cultural (as well as personal) form of identity. If, as Clifford Geertz puts it, “men unmodified by the customs of a particular place do not in fact exist,” then we must be consistent in our attempt to understand the depth and range of a writer’s potential engagement with his or her culture’s dominant themes.<sup>5</sup> I intend by this something more than the traditional determination of “influence,” historical and/or biographical. What I’m concerned with is how a writer assimilates, accommodates to and struggles for dominion over those persistent themes and values that embody what Geertz defines as the core of culture: “the attainment of concepts, the apprehension and application of specific systems of symbolic meaning,” which serve as “plans, recipes . . . instructions . . . for the governing of behavior.”<sup>6</sup> Thus my emphasis will be not on literary structure *per se*, but on how structure establishes and controls meaning – defining thematic relations, denying one option, enforcing another – and so illuminates an author’s conflicting commitments and concerns.

Let me then begin my examination of the American sense of an ending by stressing certain aspects of what I take to be the cultural ideology which informs these novels and the major structural patterns they share.

## II

For Americans, the period from the 1850s to the 1920s, which these books span, is commonly accounted one of great energy, confidence, and optimism about the future. Despite armed conflict and social upheaval, Americans were perennially reminded that the

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

### Equivocal Endings in Classic American Novels

blessings of material prosperity which accompanied industrial and geographic expansion confirmed their special status among nations – not merely a nascent continental power with abundant resources, but mankind’s last best hope.<sup>7</sup>

That Americans, from the Puritan migration onward, have seen themselves and their country as participants in a unique social and spiritual enterprise is, indeed, basic to the rhetoric of our national life. In the expanding polity of the nineteenth century, no voice had more cultural resonance than that of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson’s early essays formulate a new relation between the moral and spiritual ambition inherited from the old Puritan theocracy and the gospel of individual equality endemic to the Jacksonian era. His republic of the spirit, in which each, paradoxically, becomes the equal of all, defined a new creed of democratic idealism – one that many scholars believe continues, in various guises, to influence American attitudes toward self and community today.<sup>8</sup>

However, the standard conception of Emerson’s influence on American culture continues to emphasize a split between the Emersonian tradition and “a counter tradition originating in opposition to him.”<sup>9</sup> For though Emerson is regularly given his due as the spiritual mentor of Thoreau and Whitman, his role is not recognized as frequently for the way it permeates, or at least is congruent with, that image of the American self which can be found in all our classic novelists, regardless of which side of the Emersonian dialectic one places them on.

Emerson’s early essays, especially “Nature” and “The American Scholar,” can serve to preface what I take to be the major ideological concern of all the novels under discussion here. In radical opposition to the traditional view which sees institutional forces – religious, social, familial – as the shapers of individual identity, Emerson posits a new, self-created man who takes the measure of himself, not from his interaction with others, past and present, but from a visionary act, based upon a spiritualized interpretation of nature.<sup>10</sup> Nature, as the emanation of spirit, becomes, in effect, the double of the soul. Relying upon a greatly expanded version of conscience, an inner truth patterned on the sublime coherence of the cosmos, Emerson asks, “Who can set bounds to the possibilities of man?”<sup>11</sup> The redeemed soul is one whose vision can “read” and so “possess” the landscape; who can, in effect, re-imagine it as an

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Introduction

inexhaustible metaphor for his own state of being. As nature is shown to furnish man with a storehouse of analogies for his moral guidance, so it infuses him with a sense of vast, impersonal, and ever-renewable spiritual power. Thus conceived, it becomes the ground for a new, self-validating identity with transcendent implications. The totality of this new faith allows Emerson to proclaim that man has it in him to create the world anew. In a secular version of millennial salvation, he promises that “As fast as you go on to conform your life to the pure idea in your mind” all disagreeable things shall disappear: “Pests, madhouses, prisons, enemies [shall] vanish . . . Until evil is no more seen.”<sup>12</sup>

Among its many radical implications, Emerson’s rhetoric is notable for the way in which the new man and the new society appear as one and the same. As Sacvan Bercovitch has demonstrated, Emerson took the Romantic concept of the inspired perceiver and adjusted its tenets to the rhetoric of America’s special destiny, passed on from the Puritan errand. The self he sought in the American landscape was both personal and national, representative of an ideal America to be. In this sense the landscape itself was “the text of America, simultaneously an external model of perfection and a product of the symbolic imagination.” As its title emphasizes, “The American Scholar” outlines a vision of self-perfection that simultaneously prophesies a “New World future.”<sup>13</sup>

Thus Emerson can assure his audience that if the new man, the American, would “plant himself indomitably on his instincts and there abide, the huge world will come round to him.”<sup>14</sup> This American Colossus bestriding his “narrow world” provides us with an image that seems to epitomize the strenuous necessity under which democratic idealism labors: the demand that individual identity conform to the same morally ambitious pattern as that asserted in the older national claim to exemplary status. In Emerson (and even more in Thoreau and Whitman) this unitary aspiration is characterized by a cosmic optimism that seems calculated to dissolve the boundary between public and private, individual and social aspects of experience. As “the currents of the Universal Being circulate” through him, says Emerson, “all mean egotism vanishes.”<sup>15</sup> Subject merges with object; man expands to the proportions of the cosmos; and, momentarily at least, self and world seem to be reborn together.

Given the “optative mood” of this ambition, it is not surprising

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Joyce A. Rowe

Excerpt

[More information](#)

### Equivocal Endings in Classic American Novels

that, as F. O. Matthiessen pointed out over forty years ago, it should have provoked an immediate counter-statement.<sup>16</sup> In the works of Melville and Hawthorne, each of whom insisted on an aspect of “the power of blackness” in understanding the whole of man’s nature (and therefore the limited prospects for psychic and social renewal), we find, at the outset of this cultural dialogue, the most complex response to the meaning of American aspiration. Their explorations of the siren song of a regenerate or redemptive American self established a pattern of attraction and repulsion to which all the novels in this study are, I believe, indebted.

Yet, to observe that the novels to which we most attend as American classics take the negative or skeptical side in the dialogue of American moral ambition is to be struck all the more by the fact that in each ending the protagonist reaffirms some version of that aspiration which has already been defeated in the body of the narrative. As will become clear, I do not find in this pattern anything like the popular ‘happy ending’ of sentimental romance.<sup>17</sup> The novels I am concerned with afford us no version of the traditional comic resolution wherein discord is banished and social harmony restored. Nor, conversely, do they conclude with that tragic resolution in which man comes to accept his place in an impenetrable but nevertheless coherent metaphysical order. Indeed, at the close of these books, we see only as Prince Amerigo sees at the end of James’s *The Golden Bowl*, when he tells the luminous Maggie, “I see nothing but you.”<sup>18</sup> As a counterforce to vision, reality – as we have known it in the course of the story – has been dismissed.

These endings cannot really be considered ‘open’ in any of the senses usually associated with this term. Although connotations vary, there is a consensus that an open ending signifies an *openness* to experience as indeterminate and unpredictable – a flux which will never yield a permanent or stable sense of self. But the endings I am concerned with resist such a Romantic recognition and such an implied future for the idealist or his surrogate. At the close of their books, we do not find these protagonists going forward to encounter that “reality of experience” which will feed or shape vision. The notion of experience as a positive value (always a tentative one) has been jettisoned in favor of an equivocal hope.

For this reason, genre criticism, which attempts to explain

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Introduction

the anomalies of American fiction by attributing them to the limitations of one or another literary mode (romance or novel), seems inadequate to account for the narrative concerns explored. Instead, I believe that the tension in these endings, taken together with the rejection of Romantic aspiration in the body of the stories, justifies a critical approach that eschews the strait-jacket of formal literary categories and concentrates instead on what, for want of a better term, I can only call narrative logic; that is, the relation of structural and thematic patterns to a work's overall implications, considered in the light of its author's cultural concerns.<sup>19</sup>

Without attempting to blur their individual richness or elide their significant differences, analysis yields the outline of a remarkably similar strategy at work in all these books. None of them completes the rejection of visionary aspiration, which narrative logic might lead us to expect; neither does any fully affirm that faith in exalted possibilities which has moved the protagonist onward. Rather, these endings contrive to keep vision aloft by a shift in focus and a transposition of values. Instead of that self-recognition which we might expect from the protagonist at the climax of his or her adventures, and which is the classic prelude to any significant accommodation to social reality, these characters, in varying degrees, follow the pattern of Hawthorne's Young Goodman Brown at the Devil's altar – at the moment of crisis they turn away. Protected from confronting their own limitations and nature, and from an accommodation to that shared human condition out of which all social decency derives, their attention shifts elsewhere – to the future, to the past or to another locale (inward or outward) in space or time.

Just as each of these books posits at or near its beginning an ideal image of social and moral freedom, of spiritual adventure, each ends with a protagonist alone on an empty stage, a spiritual orphan cast back once again into a metaphoric, if not literal, wilderness. In keeping with traditional associations, this virgin wilderness suggests a limbo, a place from which rebirth or renewal may yet occur. Given the quality of postponement or evasion which these endings entail, their ultimate effect is to preserve the image of a hero who is even more of a mystery at the end of his story than he was during its course. His unmasking is never completed for to do this would destroy the possibility of renewing the



Cambridge University Press

0521335329 - Equivocal Endings in Classic American Novels: The Scarlet Letter; Adventures of Huckleberry Finn; The Ambassadors; The Great Gatsby

Joyce A. Rowe

Excerpt

[More information](#)

### Equivocal Endings in Classic American Novels

dream, of recreating a self commensurate with the promise of a new society.

The correlatives of this pattern can be found within the structure of each text. All of these books are remarkable for their lack of a middle ground. None affords the kind of dialectical interaction between characters of opposing types, classes or attitudes that readings of English and/or Continental novels would lead us to expect. Nowhere do we find those interlinked social contexts that foster the development of personality within the moral texture of a richly nuanced world. To this end I will compare works by Dickens and Conrad with American ones, and allude to other English and Continental examples in order to clarify the implications for American identity of what Lionel Trilling called the "isolate autonomy" of the characters in American novels.<sup>20</sup>

For it seems clear, notwithstanding the complaints of Hawthorne, Cooper, and James that American life lacked social interest and texture, that the concerns of our major writers inhibited the depiction of a social scene which might meliorate or engross the moral energies of their protagonists. Alternative commitments, rather than the thinness of social actuality, would seem to have been the primary reason for the abstractions and polarizations which dominate the structure of these books. Hawthorne's claims in this regard are telling. What he longed for and found lacking in American life was not greater social density of the type he admired in Trollope's work, for instance, but more possibilities for a Romantic or Gothic setting: the shadow and gloom of antiquity, old and picturesque wrongs.<sup>21</sup> In other words, a scene that would function primarily for symbolic not mimetic purposes.

Early in this century, D. H. Lawrence, in his seminal study of American classics, claimed that American writers (like all Americans) dreamed of an anti-social, anti-humanist freedom – a desire to slough off what for Europeans constituted the sense of personal consciousness and escape into a state of being as isolate and impersonal as the new continent itself. "That is, in the progressive American consciousness there has been the one dominant desire, to do away with the old thing."<sup>22</sup> Lawrence may have overstated and simplified the issues, but his intuition that what can be distinguished as abstract or impersonal in the American consciousness represents a positive valence rather than merely a lack or inadequacy when measured by European standards, draws atten-



Cambridge University Press

0521335329 - Equivocal Endings in Classic American Novels: The Scarlet Letter; Adventures of Huckleberry Finn; The Ambassadors; The Great Gatsby

Joyce A. Rowe

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Introduction

tion to key elements of the American scene, and is still, I believe, the generative insight for comprehending these works.

One recent permutation of Lawrence's thesis which accounts in its own way for the absence of a social middle ground in key American works, and which has particular bearing on this study, is Richard Poirier's *A World Elsewhere*. Poirier discusses the style of American novelists against the foil of the English, in order to show that the latter's idea of society as a field for self-realization doesn't occur to American writers because their attention is engaged not by the possibilities for the self that exist within the social framework but by an alternative dream of boundless imaginative freedom. Thus, the world that would match this ideal state of consciousness is, by definition, elsewhere.

It would seem that the Emersonian aspiration which runs through these novels and is resurrected in their endings can, in part, be conceived in Poirier's terms. Yet the structure of these books, as well as the equivocation in their endings, suggests a more complex relation to social and psychological reality than his view permits. For in each story there seems to be more at stake than solely the struggle of the inner consciousness to break free of the prison house of daily existence. As Poirier himself points out in relation to *Huckleberry Finn*, the examination and criticism of "the social panorama" of the shore occupies a dominant portion of that book<sup>23</sup> – and this pattern holds true for each of the novels under discussion here.

Indeed, it is the failure of the social group to realize its communal potential that drives each of these protagonists into a deeper opposition to things as they are. For though the content of the hero's vision has been notoriously difficult to define, the structure of these books, with their emblematic partnerships, shows it to have social as well as personal ramifications. Far from being a blueprint for social or spiritual Utopia, the hero's aspiration creates the outline of an absence, an ideal defined in terms of a lack. And while each of these books provides its own historically specific commentary on the substance of this lack, taken together they express an ambition for the American self that is, I believe, both tougher and more melancholy than that self-perpetuating aesthetic exuberance, which is the goal, as Poirier sees it, of a consciousness dedicated to "boundless freedom." Indeed, by limiting himself to a study of style – the language by which private

Cambridge University Press

0521335329 - Equivocal Endings in Classic American Novels: The Scarlet Letter;  
Adventures of Huckleberry Finn; The Ambassadors; The Great Gatsby

Joyce A. Rowe

Excerpt

[More information](#)

### Equivocal Endings in Classic American Novels

consciousness seeks to evade the bounds of the social world – Poirier, though deeply sensitive to the implications of language, nevertheless himself evades consideration of the hero's complex relation to that social world which is condemned for betraying him.<sup>24</sup> Ultimately, the desire for a kind of gaseous expansion of consciousness, without any significant moral ballast, can all too easily be re-conceived as a longing for that perpetual adolescence which Leslie Fiedler considers to be the hallmark of American literary heroes.<sup>25</sup>

While there is undeniable truth to Fiedler's accusations, the condition they depict is, I believe, the result not the cause of social disaffection. What saves these books and these heroes from mere regression is the moral scrutiny they bring to bear on the society they oppose. Viewed from the perspective of their Puritan patrimony, it cannot be entirely coincidental that these works of fiction bear some faint resemblance to the effect and even the gross outline of the New England jeremiad, as they chronicle the failures of the present in the light of an ideal which they continue to resurrect.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, this prophetic legacy may even afford a clue to the provenance of that singular tension between individual and group which characterizes these works.

Each of these narratives is centered on a protagonist who appears as outcast or outsider to the norms of the social group with which he or she is peripherally allied. Each has an allegiance to a moral or spiritual imperative, an ideal identity (conceived as a form of freedom) which he or she asserts as an absolute, prior to any current mode of self-definition which the group may take for its own. But though the protagonist would seem to be only fortuitously connected to the group at hand, close reading suggests that there is actually a polar opposition between the two, and that at the core they are intimately allied. In each instance the protagonist remains loyal to an aspiration that the group has either abandoned or betrayed.<sup>27</sup> This configuration, which is keyed to motifs of disguise, secrecy and submerged leadership, is explicit in the ending of *The Scarlet Letter*, where Hester's isolation and suffering endow her with charismatic status in the eyes of the townspeople, especially the women. But versions of this basic pattern – the hero who is invested with special abilities and has a mysterious attraction for others while keeping his nature partly hidden (from himself as well as from them) – are a constant among all these books.