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# Understanding American Literature from a Historical Perspective: Four Things for Chinese Students to Know

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中文摘要：本文的出发点在于向研究美国文学的中国学生提供有关的建议。美国文学本身并不是一个僵化不变的领域，因此作者的建议旨在让中国学生尽可能有深度、有学理性地形成一套关于文学是什么的解读系统。具体而言，首先应以 1820 年代和 1830 年代——统一的美国国内市场经济形成之时——为美国文学真正的“起点”，而不是通常所认为的由朝圣者开启的殖民地时期。其次，学生需要了解整个 18 世纪，尤其是启蒙知识分子关于“感知力的文化”的理念，这一点对掌握美国文学引起读者共鸣的方式尤为重要；为了进一步阐明这一点，作者以霍桑的《小伙子布朗》和斯坦贝克的《愤怒的葡萄》为文本，探讨阅读中感同身受的现象。再者，学生应多花时间来形成理解文学作品深层涵义的思维，而不是仅仅记住人名、体裁、学派等。作者在此基础上归纳了文中观点可能引发的异议，并列举了一些相对冷门的作品来加深对美国文学的理解。

## **Introduction**

“This is an especially good moment for Chinese students to read American literature” I told students of English and American culture at Sichuan University. This essay is based on that claim. I aim to expand upon this assertion and present it in a more documented form, while keeping (hopefully) some of the excitement of the initial argument. Certainly, taken in itself, the idea that this moment, rather than another one, is “especially good” for reading American literature is rather silly. At any given period in time there are most likely always going to be solid reasons to read American literature. This is the sort of thing that one can say out loud to generate curiosity and momentum, but which does not stand up if left to serve as an argument in its own right. Yet, despite this, I feel that the conjunction of several historical trends--in literary culture, in Chinese and American higher education, and above all, in the nature of globalization itself--make it desirable for Chinese students in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century to read American literature. In saying this, what matters is not so much the conclusions, but the reasons advanced. By laying out the material as I see it, I hope to spark a wider discussion about what is at stake when American literature is considered as a whole, and what contributions Chinese readers might make in its critical assessment.

While it is not worthwhile to burden academic writing with superfluous personal comment, there is one biographical detail that puts things in better perspective. I write this from the vantage of someone who has recently moved to China from the United States. Once transplanted across the Pacific, I discovered that I wanted to read more American literature, and that I read it with increased interest and absorption. I do not think this was a negative reaction to an unfamiliar environment. As a matter of fact, I feel little to nothing in the way of nostalgia or homesickness for the United States; am fascinated by Chinese literature and culture, and consider Chinese cuisine to be (considerably) superior to America's. Rather than going back to something familiar, American literature regained my interest because I started to see it through the eyes of a different place. Specifically, I started to see it from the eyes of someone who, almost daily, came into contact with Chinese students. It was the understanding of their ambitions, wishes, frustrations and setbacks that made me return to American literature to look again at the ways that, for me, more native authors treated these very themes. Given the vastness of the material, to say nothing of the magnitude of the themes themselves, I asked myself if I only had one class



session what would I want Chinese students to understand of American literature. That was the origin of the following reflections.

One more thing: I write about American literature from the perspective not of a specialist in literary studies, but as a historian, one that is not even primarily focused on the United States, but on the general development of Western civilizations; their rise and fall, particularly in relationship to Eastern civilizations, and the possible emergence of what we might call a global civilization. This absence of specialization is not always an advantage, but it has a benefit in that it is stepping back from what is typically taught to US students about the history of American literature to ask the question of what, specifically, Chinese students truly need to know.

Here then is the start of my list:

The first thing for Chinese students to know is that American stories about settling the wilderness are not a sound starting point for an understanding of American literature. This applies to favorable myths, like those portraying the American continent as a new “Eden,” as well as critiques and debunkings, that try to expose and refute a self-glorified version of the American past. In fact, despite the importance of the Colonial Age, it might be more useful for a Chinese student to begin the story of American literature in the early 19<sup>th</sup>-century.

The phrase “Eden” is not meant to be completely dismissive, even though I distance myself from this line of reasoning. “Eden” is not a contemporary reference, but, rather, the ways the very first American authors saw the continent as a special kind of “wilderness” where a paradise could be realized, if only the new American settlers would stick to a special, providential plan. There was once a time where historians of American literature, even if they no longer believed that the American people were a “new Israel” and the American continent was somehow promised by God to European settlers, did believe that since the American experience was somehow special that American literature was, in different ways, about the glories and miseries of this unique mission.<sup>[1]</sup> More recent scholarship rebels against this enthusiasm in a specific way. Instead, of celebrating or endorsing an American sense of mission, it illustrates the bloody cost paid by those who were excluded and expropriated by the establishment and expansion of the United States. Thus, despite the clear difference in mood and judgment, both camps begin from the point that John Winthrop began in 1630, when he famously envisioned the Puritan settlement

of America as establishing a “city on a hill,” or an ideal community, free of the vices and depravity that plagued humanity before.<sup>[2]</sup> The difference is that one stresses the reasons why the United States might be a “light unto the world,” while the other stresses the reasons it should not.

Historically speaking, this is a very valuable debate and any sensitive and sophisticated treatment of American civilization must account for the ways opportunity and oppression, liberty and terror, etc. are woven together. Yet, as vital as this is for understanding the unfolding of American history, placing it at the start of the study of American literature deflects attention from the fact that while you can speak of American society unfolding through many changes from the early 17<sup>th</sup>-century onward, there is a sense that, as far as literature is concerned, it only really got going in the early 19<sup>th</sup>-century. In this sense, the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup>-century were a formative period with distinctive concerns of their own.

It is not necessary to deny that the themes and motifs introduced in early American literature had no impact on what came after in order to explain the break between the 19<sup>th</sup>-century and what came before. We have already touched on some of the ways that Puritan religious concerns shaped the perception of American literature. Indeed, if we ask about subsequent influence the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries are immensely important, but if we ask what comes to mind when we think of American literature, or what, for instance, Chinese students are likely to read, a different picture emerges. The novels and stories produced from the 19<sup>th</sup>-century onward predominate in forming the main contours of what comes to mind as American literature.

Putting the matter this way is certainly unfair to American poetry and theater, as well such 18<sup>th</sup>-century autobiographies that might be introduced to contemporary Chinese students like those by Benjamin Franklin (1771-90) and Olaudah Equiano (1789). In fact, there is no point in trying to make the claim that American literature revolves primarily around novels and stories and, thus, most properly begins in the early 19<sup>th</sup>-century as entirely accurate or fair. It is not. Instead, we should ask what can be gained by asking Chinese students to think along these lines, and what can subsequently be done to ensure that the conclusions they thereby draw are not overly broad or misleading. I see three advantages in following this line of reasoning:

1. Colonial literature is primarily *Protestant* literature, and reportage.<sup>[3]</sup> Asking a 21<sup>st</sup>-century Chinese student to read Michael Wigglesworth’s *Day of Doom*--a long

poem from 1662 describing the punishment handed out to sinners after their death--presumes a clear understanding (to say nothing of interest) in Puritan doctrines of damnation and salvation.<sup>[4]</sup> Certainly, this poem plays an important part of early American literature. The Norton Anthology goes as far to suggest that one in twenty people in Colonial New England owned it. But it is unlikely to be what most Chinese readers have in mind when they think of American literature. The point here is not to fight about what is in or out, but to ask what people aim at when they turn to American literature. Based on my observation, I would suggest that what they seek are stories that in some way express what it means to be an American. Starting American literature “later” would permit that concern to be broached immediately, and addressed with full self-consciousness.

2. Likewise, “beginning” the story of American literature in the early 19<sup>th</sup>-century disentangles history from literature in a productive way. That is, the colonial period can be examined for its own sake, not as a way to celebrate or debunk myths of American uniqueness. This approach focuses attention on teaching and studying what actually happened in the conquest and settlement of America, as well as the establishment of the USA.. This, in turn, places Puritan and Protestant motifs in an easier to teach context, thereby allowing students to form their own judgments about the ways that this heritage colored the portrayal of the human condition in American literature.<sup>[5]</sup>

3. Finally, as a kind of payoff, beginning the story circa 1830 depicts American literature as a kind of drama that a contemporary Chinese audience might find very involving and compelling. It is not about entering a wilderness, whether as an innocent, or as a despoiler. And it does not revolve around a nexus of sin and salvation. Instead, it is about the interaction of people and forces in an expanding market economy. In 1820 the US population was about 9.6 million, of which approximately 1.5 million were slaves. This was the take-off stage for an ever growing population, and an ever demanding and highly producing economy. This process, particularly the joys and losses suffered by individuals, is obviously of great interest to readers all over the world. American literature, I believe, would be even more interesting (and instructive) to Chinese readers if framed this way. In fact, even American poetry and drama could be linked to this new “meta-story” of making sense of the self in the (sometimes) growing market economy. This leads to the second point.

The second thing for Chinese students to know is that, though it may no longer be that helpful to see American literature as beginning with Puritan myths of the wilderness, or of democratic forms, there is an 18<sup>th</sup>-century “preparation” that is vital, to convey to students. This is the “Age of Sensibility.” Students should know about this 18<sup>th</sup>-century intellectual background.

At the start of an anthology widely available in China, *The Penguin Book of American Short Stories*, the editor James Cochrane writes that “Above all, perhaps, the American short story has been an essentially democratic form, not troubling itself overmuch about the categories of High, Middle and Low, serious and lightweight that bedevil other forms of creative writing.”<sup>[6]</sup> Although the qualifier “perhaps” renders this statement almost useless, it does show the problem of what happens when we treat a whole literature in terms of broad generalization. For while, the short story literature as a whole shows blending of genres, styles (as does the novel, and everything else, by the way), if we look closely at individual creations we certainly see that they were not that democratic, and that Henry James, say, cared very much about the differences between forms.

I mention this not so much to criticize James Cochrane, who had to say something in his introduction, but because students are influenced by blanket statements, especially when they seem to offer the key to unlocking things. Is there a better way to provide them a vantage point or philosophical vocabulary about the literature as a whole?

I think that there is, and its best exponent, interestingly enough, is not an American, and happens to be primarily remembered as an economist, namely Adam Smith. Yet, all scholars of the history of economics point out that Smith’s theories about wealth and markets are inseparable from his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, which happens to be the title of a book he published in 1759.<sup>[7]</sup> For our purposes, it is not necessary to go into the full ramifications of Smith’s thinking. Instead, we can simply ask if Smith’s psychology has any important perspective to offer Chinese students of American literature. The answer is yes if we focus on the key notion of sympathy. What is this sympathy? As students of 18<sup>th</sup>-century Western culture agree it is not confined to the current day emotion of feeling sorry for someone else’s misfortune. Rather, as authors like Smith argued, it is the central medium through which people formed proper ethical understanding. You observe, and then call up the proper feelings that “sync” or connect you to what is going on.<sup>[8]</sup> Most directly, you feel what someone else is feeling. It has been noted more than once that Smith

philosophical psychology coincided with the period that saw the “rise of the novel.”<sup>[9]</sup> To awaken the proper feelings you need an exact description of what is happening, and to make sense of events you must sympathize in an accurate manner. Novelists sharpen our eyes to what is going on, thus enabling us to sympathize in what Smith would call an “impartial” or undistorted manner.

Why bring this up in the context of Chinese students learning about American literature? The point is certainly not that American novels and stories are all intended to be a direct application of Smith’s theories, but rather to suggest that that this wider culture of sensibility--of which Smith was only one exponent--establishes a kind of momentum for the literature that followed. Students learning about this culture of sensibility could then be taught to ask questions about the kind of feelings a text seems designed to evoke, as well as the reasons why some scenarios are used to call up this feeling, rather than others. Even when the form and content of the literature moves away from the concerns of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century, students can still profitably ask the same questions about the work’s “sensibility.” Naturally, I do not suggest that nothing be said about Puritans and Pilgrims, but providing students with an explanatory framework revolving around transformations of cultures of sensibility will, I believe, help them ask more perceptive questions about what this literature means, both in the past and present.

Behind this argument is a claim stated very well in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*’s entry of Smith’s moral and political thought: “A central thread running through [Smith’s] work is an unusually strong commitment to the soundness of the ordinary human being’s judgments, and a concern to fend off attempts, by philosophers and policy-makers, to replace those judgments with the supposedly better ‘systems’ invented by intellectuals.” Obviously, the treatment of intellectuals varies in a literature as diverse as America’s. However, the theme of the soundness of ordinary judgment recurs again and again, even when it is being eviscerated, as in, say, the works of Sinclair Lewis. Teaching students to look at the ways sympathy is being directed is also an occasion to ask how ordinary judgment and ordinary voices are depicted. These questions would let them forge their own--profitable--path through the forest of American literature. To see one example of such path-forging, turn to the next section.

The third thing for Chinese students to know is that there is a noticeable strand of anti-clericalism, and hostility to organized religion in American literature. Looking at a few examples will demonstrate how authors evoke sympathy with those at odds with

religion. This, in turn, allows for more fruitful discussion of how American literature mirrors and comments on the place of sentiment and feeling within a dynamic market economy.

The ideas proposed so far suggest that the authors of American literature understand themselves to be autonomous forces, choosing the views and traditions that they represent, and deciding how to depict reality in a way that directs the reader's sympathy. We can postpone for the time being whether a student should fully accept this view of the author. For now, let us ask what, in fact, makes it fruitful to see American literature from this point of view. Consider, therefore, two views on religion from authors Chinese students are most likely to know, namely Nathaniel Hawthorne and John Steinbeck, beginning with Hawthorne's *Young Goodman Brown*, a story certainly worth assigning and discussing today. Set in colonial New England, in it, a young minister takes a walk in an untamed forest with a sinister character who is undoubtedly the devil himself. Along the way Goodman Brown learns that the devil is on quite familiar terms with the most decent members of society, including pious old ladies and, of course, the high clergy. All of them, no matter how hypocritically they pretend to be godly and holy, have sworn themselves to Satan. Critics have noted, and continue to discuss, the ways that Hawthorne builds his visions around binary contrasts: between innocence and corruption, civilization and wilderness, outward appearance and inward nature, etc. <sup>[10]</sup> However, Hawthorne himself does not believe in the supernatural events that he describes. In fact, his attitude toward old New England, as easily demonstrated in *The Scarlet Letter*, is one where affection for the "good old ways" is strongly tempered by harsh criticism of their norms and mores, as well as a doubting skepticism about cherished myths and beliefs. <sup>[11]</sup> Thus, whatever else we might say about the story's meaning, Hawthorne's own direction comes out most clearly when, at the story's end, he winks at the reader and says "Had Goodman Brown fallen asleep in the forest and only dreamed a wild dream of a witch meeting?" <sup>[12]</sup> He then draws his own pointed conclusion:

Be it so if you will, but, alas! It was a dream of evil omen for Goodman Brown. A stern, sad, a darkly meditative, a distrustful, if not a desperate man did he become from the night of that fearful dream. On the Sabbath day, when the congregation were singing a holy psalm, he could not listen because an anthem of sin rushed loudly upon his ear and drowned all the blessed strain. When the minister spoke from the pulpit with power and fervid eloquence, and, with his hand on the open Bible, of the

sacred truths of our religion, and of saint-like lives and triumphant deaths, and of future bliss, or misery unutterable, then did Goodman Brown turn pale, dreading lest the roof should thunder down on the gray blasphemer and his hearers.<sup>[13]</sup>

In short, from that point onward he could never trust the church, or any other individual, or high-sounding institution. That Hawthorne was aware of the political implications of this mistrust of the church is evident when, in an earlier passage, the devil says, devilishly enough, that he helped his family participate in their “public” works:

Goodman Brown, I have been well acquainted with your family as with ever a one among the puritans; and that’s no trifle to say. I helped your grandfather, the constable, when he lashed the Quaker woman so smartly through the streets of Salem; and it was I that brought your father a pitch-pine knot, kindled at my own hearth, to set fire to an Indian village, in King Philipp’s War. They were my good friends, both...<sup>[14]</sup>

King Philipp’s War is, of course, an actual war, and the reference to attacks on Quakers by Puritans is another episode in humanity’s history of violent intolerance. Here we see Hawthorne making sure that the reader gets his point: official morality is not only to be mistrusted in general, abstract terms. As a matter of fact, it is a prime vehicle for expression of religious persecution, sexual sadism and sneak attacks in the service of ethnic cleansing and extermination.

From this frightening point, we can step back and reflect on the wider themes. Hawthorne’s anti-clericalism and suspicion of official morality is an exercise in directing sympathy. The reader is not supposed to take what he or she reads at face value, either in believing it literally, or in thinking that the point is solely to condemn Puritans, and leave others untouched. Instead, even though the point is not belabored, we are supposed to put ourselves in the place of the victims of such official morality, and by sympathizing in that direction wonder if Goodman Brown’s fate might be our own. American literature, seen from this lens, is a working out of the full implications of a philosophy that argues that the key task, artistically, as well as morally, is to align the reader’s feeling more accurately so that they can think more sharply and insightfully.

An obvious objection to the point just made is that it may apply to a single story by Hawthorne, but is not necessarily helpful for the larger topic of helping Chinese students approach the literature as a whole. Yet, the example chosen is not designed

to suggest that all American authors are like Hawthorne or that the only possible direction of sympathy should be toward the critique of religion, official religion, or maybe religion altogether. Rather, the example is designed to demonstrate the fruitfulness of phrasing this sort of question to students. Once they learn to see a single story this way they can go on to ask more sophisticated questions of how different works and authors compare. They can become adventurers in deciding the direction of American sympathy. In doing so, they can begin to formulate more subtle and informed theories of what this direction of sympathy can accomplish, and what it cannot.

The meaning of this last point is best fleshed out by selecting another example from *The Grapes of Wrath*. In its own way, it takes up Hawthorne's concerns by extending the critique of hypocrisy. The scene is a federal government relief camp in California in the depths of the depression.<sup>[15]</sup> Whatever negative connotations a government camp may have in other contexts, in Steinbeck's California a relief camp run by appointees of the government in Washington offers poor migrants the only opportunities they have to protect themselves by collective organization. His protagonists, the Joad's, first learn about this self-organization when they drive into the camp, luckily discover that a place has just been vacated, and hear from a chatty watchman about the self-government of the camp. In addition to providing a measure of protection against the company-employed security services, the camp's elected Central Committee enables the community to regulate the way religious figures treat them. Describing the Committee, the watchman explains:

Tell you what they did--you know the Holy Roller preachers all the time follow the people around preachin' an' takin' up collections? Well, they wanted to preach in this camp. And a lot of the older folks wanted them. So it was up to the Central Committee. They went into meeting and here's how they fixed it. They say, 'Any preacher can preach in this camp. Nobody can take up a collection in this camp. And it was kinda sad for the old folks, 'cause there hasn't been a preacher in since.'<sup>[16]</sup>

The point of Steinbeck's satire is clear enough: the preaching was a kind of business. The collections, or religious donations, were a form of profit, and the religious organizations acted in ways not that different than the other companies exploiting the simple migrants. Where this expands on Hawthorne's concerns is in the specificity and scope of the social critique. Whereas Hawthorne had simply suggested that the leaders of society were hiding their moral corruption, Steinbeck



tries to demonstrate the mechanisms whereby the lies were perpetuated (and potentially blocked). It is most unlikely that he was thinking directly of Hawthorne when he wrote *The Grapes of Wrath*, and that is not the point. Rather, the point is to show how, once students begin to direct the reader's sympathy toward victims of hypocrisy and oppression that it is possible to draw fruitful links between authors and works, and that what holds this discussion together is the very thing that Adam Smith imagined would hold together a discussion of human affairs, namely the projective capacity to imagine ourselves in another's position. This is a culture of sensibility. I believe that once students are asked to look at American literature as overlapping exercises in sympathy-directing they will form ever more penetrating accounts of what the literature means to them and what it reveals about the human spirit. An objection to the conclusion just reached leads to the final point.

The fourth and last thing Chinese should know is that they go beyond making their immersion in American literature revolve around the learning of names of genres, eras and schools. Discussion with students shows that they often mistake this part for the whole. That is, they think that learning about the scholarly categories, "Transcendentalism," "Modernism," etc. is sufficient to give the overview they need to engage the literature. The last thing that they should know is they are mistaken.

I remember seeing a fairly large group of Chinese students with photocopied editions of a large volume of Transcendentalism.<sup>[17]</sup> I was impressed with their dedication, but the book would be difficult, even for American students, and I wondered what really got through to them. Was it the challenge and spirit of the literature, or was it the labels and formulas? If asked, could they clarify the content of the quotations in that thick and difficult book, or would they remember the abstract summaries, the "test answers," as it were.

The preceding lines were written in cognizance of the tone taken by Vladimir Nabokov's in his opening comments to the reworked novel, *Despair* (first published in Russian in 1932, translated by Nabokov into English in 1936, and then revised substantially for a 1965 edition). Belligerently, he states: "*Despair*, in kinship with the rest of my books, has no social comment to make, no message to bring in its teeth. It does not uplift the spiritual organ of man, not does it show humanity the right exit. It contains far fewer "ideas" than do those rich vulgar novels that are acclaimed so hysterically in the short echo walk between the ballyhoo and the echo."<sup>[18]</sup> The meaning of this last phrase seems to be that critics and publishing