The American Expatriate Literary Tradition

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AMERICAN

Expatriate

LITERARY TRADITION

Professor Shonda Stevens, Department of English
Lane Miller, McKenna Britton, & Jamie Karnes

Throughout this multi-stage research project, we have gained a much clearer view of the American expatriate perspective and its effects on the literature produced. The works of these expatriates are highly valuable for their insights regarding American culture and character as they comment using the unique experiences of their own countries beyond the confines of the continental U.S. The expatriate tradition is currently an under-studied area of American literature and we hope our research will provide a connection between the more limited earlier studies and these contemporary interests in writing global fiction which transcends single-national identities.

METHODS

We began our research by focusing on geographical locations and the major concentrations of American artists in Europe. We then incorporated elements of popular literary movements as expressed in works of American expatriation, as well as offer consideration for individual authors’ motives for writing their experiences abroad, whether in fiction or memoir. Revisiting traditional, limited explanations of American literary studies and those contemporary interpretations and the major concentrations of American artists in Europe. We then incorporated elements of popular literary movements as expressed in works of American expatriation, as well as offer consideration for individual authors’ motives for writing their experiences abroad, whether in fiction or memoir. Revisiting traditional, limited explanations of American literary expatriate tradition, we moved to expand the focus beyond a simple who and what, continuing to focus chronologically, but adding to this critical discussion the badly needed examination of the where and why. Our effort was to trace the evolution of the American expatriate experience, its geographical centers, and its lasting significance, especially as trends in American literary study have turned toward an interest in the transnational.

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CONCLUSION

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THE COSMOPOLITAN

TRANSATLANTIC

Beginning in 1850, aristocratic American authors sought to escape the limitations of post-Civil War American society and experience life, art, and high culture abroad. American technical achievements in all modes of travel made the transatlantic trip far more accessible and comfortable, and so London became a base for American writers abroad and thus a significant city in the founding of the American expatriate literary tradition. Realist authors such as Henry James and Edith Wharton focused their fiction heavily on evaluating the American character beyond the confines of national geography and explored in depth the idea of the “International Theme” in American fiction. So, too, did this first wave of American expatriate writers newly popularize the genre of literary travel for readers back in the United States.

THE MODERNISTS

In the early 1900s, a far more socially diverse crowd of American authors traveled across the ocean to participate in the Modernist experiments already taking place in Europe. Painters, poets, novelists, journalists, and many ex-soldiers who first saw the Old World as a result of their WWI service, established an expatriate community in Paris which changed literature and art forever. These American expatriates, benefitting from the cafe society the city afforded, re-imagined the function, purpose, and shape of art and challenged traditional notions of literature as a veritable experimenters of Modernism, Imagism, and Vorticism. Writing back to America, the technical and urban explosions in their native country as well as writing from the disillusion they faced as the generation of World War I, these writers pushed out from the more comfortable boundaries of London and into a distinctly new phase of experimental literature and social commentary now taking place on the Continent.

POSTWAR EXILES

In the wake of World War II, America’s role on the global stage was changing, as were the interests and values of American expatriate writers. The Beat Generation artists broadened the scope of countries commonly visited, eventually finding in Morocco and India new centers of expatriate experience. African-American writers participated in self-fashioned identity explorations overseas, writing in reaction to the racial and cultural tumults happening in America at the time. Expatriate literature of this period reflects an “anywhere but in America” attitude, whereby authors of all walks found, by leaving their home country, new modes and means of authentic self-expression.