

Dr Tessa Roynon

Lecture 1: The Modern American Novel: An Introduction

(I am delivering this lecture as if it were the first in a series, over the course of a university term, on the subject of the modern American novel. You will need to keep this document open on your screen and refer to it, looking at the passages I direct you to, as you listen to the first half of the lecture in particular).

Novels to be studied on this course:

1. F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (1925)
2. William Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying* (1930)
3. Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (1957)
4. Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (1977)
5. Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1987)
6. Philip Roth, *American Pastoral* (1997)

Background reading / other works referred to in the lecture:

Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury, *From Puritanism to Postmodernism: A History of American Literature* (Penguin 1992)

Susan Castillo and Ivy Schweitzer, *The Literatures of Colonial America: An Anthology* (Blackwell, 2001)

Next are brief excerpts from four early texts: documents about America's 'discovery' and 'foundation' that are significant in the history and construction of modern America

(A) is a letter from Christopher Columbus (15th century); (B) is a letter from the Virginia colonist John Smith (early 17th century); (C) is a passage from William Bradford's account of the Pilgrim Fathers' voyage to Massachusetts on the Mayflower (1620); and (D) is two excerpts from the Founding Fathers' Declaration of Independence, issued in 1776 at the start of the American Revolution against the English ruling powers.

A) From the letter of Christopher Columbus, 1493, about his first voyage of 1492. Translated anonymously from the Latin in 1892. Repr. in ed. Susan Castillo and Ivy Schweitzer, *The Literatures of Colonial America: An Anthology* (Blackwell, 2001), 24-25.

From this place I saw another island to the east, distant from this Juana 54 miles, which I called forthwith Hispana and I sailed to it. [. . .] This island is surrounded by many very safe and wide harbours, not excelled by any others that I have ever seen. Many great and salubrious rivers flow through it. There are also many very high mountains there. All these islands are very beautiful, and distinguished by various qualities; they are accessible, and full of a great variety of trees stretching up to the stars; the leaves of which I believe are never shed, for I saw them as green and flourishing as they are usually in Spain in the month of May; some of them were blossoming, some were bearing fruit, [. . .] each one was thriving in its own way. The nightingale and various other birds without number were singing, in the month of November, [. . .] exceed belief, unless one has seen them.

. . . This Hispana, moreover, abounds in different kinds of spices, in gold, and in metals. On this island, indeed, [. . .], the inhabitants of both sexes go always naked, just as they came into the world, except some of the women, who use a covering of a leaf or some foliage, or a cotton cloth, which they make themselves for that purpose.



B) From John Smith, 'A Description of New England', 1616. Repr. in Castillo and Schweitzer, Literatures of Colonial America 203-204.



A print dating from 1870, illustrating Pocahontas saving John Smith's life.

I am not so simple to thinke that ever any other motive than wealth will ever erect there a common wealth, or draw company from their ease and humors at home, to stay in New England to effect my purposes

My purpose is not to perswade children from their parents, men from their wives, nor servants from their masters; [. . .] but that each Parish, or Village, in Citie, or Country, that will but apparel their fatherlesse children of thirteene or foureteene yeeres of age, or young married people that have small wealth to live on, here by their labour my live exceeding well. Provided always, that first there be a sufficient power to command them [. . .] the Master, by this, may quickly grow riche, these may learne their trades themselves to doe the like, to a generall and incredible benefit for the King and Country, Master and Servant.

. . . Religion above all things should move us, especially the Clergies, if we are religious, to shew our faith by our works, in converting those poore Salvages to the knowledge of God.

C) From William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, Book I, Chapter IX.

'Of their Voyage, and how they Passed the Sea; and of their Safe Arrival at Cape Cod'.

Repr. in Castillo and Schweitzer, *Literatures of Colonial America* 257-66.

. . . After a long beating at sea they fell with that land which is called Cape Cod; the which being made and certainly known to be it, they were not a little joyful. [. . .] But after they had sailed that course about half the day, they fell amongst dangerous shoals and roaring breakers, and they were so far entangled therewith as they conceived themselves in great danger; and the wind shrinking upon them withal, they resolved to bear up again for the Cape and thought themselves happy to get out of those dangers before night overtook them, as by God's good providence they did. [. . .]

But here I cannot but say and make a pause, and stand half amazed at this poor people's present condition; and so I think will the reader, too, when he well considers the same. Being thus passed the vast ocean, and a sea of troubles before in their preparation, [. . .] they had now no friends to welcome them nor inns to entertain or refresh their weatherbeaten bodies; no houses or much less towns to repair to, to seek for succour. It is recorded in Scripture 4 as a mercy to the Apostle and his shipwrecked company, that the barbarians showed them no small kindness in refreshing them, but these savage barbarians [. . .] were readier to fill their sides with arrows than otherwise. And for the season it was winter, and they that know the winter of that country know them to be sharp and violent and subject to cruel and fierce storms, dangerous to travel to known places, much more to search an unknown coast. Besides, what could they see but a hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts and wild men – and what multitudes there might be of them they knew not.



D) From Thomas Jefferson, Declaration of Independence, 1776. Repr. in ed. Castillo and Schweitzer, Literatures of Colonial America 524-29.

i) We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness: that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.



United States Declaration of Independence

ii) [The present king of Great Britain] has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating and carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither. This piratical warfare, the opprobrium of infidel powers, is the warfare of the Christian king of Great Britain. Determined to keep open a market where men should be bought and sold, he has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or restrain this execrable commerce.