

The Ambivalence of T.S. Eliot: To be or not to be an American

تناقض تي إس إليوت: أن تكون أمريكيا أو لا تكون

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Abstract:

Although T.S. Eliot is often considered an English poet, dismissing his American roots is a mistake. D. Moody argues that Eliot's poetry is deeply influenced by the American experience and that his Anglophilia reflects anxiety towards his American predecessor, Walt Whitman. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Whitman's "When Lilacs in the Dooryard First Bloom" illustrate Eliot's place within the American tradition, despite his frequent references to English writer Geoffrey Chaucer. Thus, Eliot's poetry cannot be separated from its Americanness.

Keywords: Modernism; European Literary Tradition; American Literary Tradition; Intertextuality; Deconstruction; Americanness.

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ملخص:

على الرغم من أن توماس س. إليوت يعتبر في كثير من الأحيان شاعرًا إنجليزيًا، إلا أن استبعاد جذوره الأمريكية يعد خطأ. يؤكد ديفيد مودي أن شعر إليوت يتأثر بشدة بالتجربة الأمريكية، وأن حبه للأدب الإنجليزي يعكس القلق تجاه سلفه الأمريكي، والت وايتمان. توضح قصيدة إليوت "الأرض المهملّة" *The Waste Land* "وقصيدة وايتمان "عندما أزهز الليلك في الحديقة" *"When Lilacs in the Dooryard"* *First Bloom'd* مكانة إليوت داخل التقليد الأمريكي، على الرغم من التناسل المتكرر للكاتب الإنجليزي جيفري تشوسر. وبالتالي، لا يمكن فصل شعر إليوت عن جذوره الأمريكية.

كلمات مفتاحية: الحداثة؛ التقليد الأدبي الأوروبي؛ التقليد الأدبي الأمريكي؛ التناسل؛ التفكيك؛ الأمركة.

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1. Introduction

This article aims to shed light on T.S. Eliot's cultural identity and ambivalence towards his American roots. Despite being an American by birth, Eliot's European settlement, religious conversion, and British citizenship make him an ambiguous figure, especially for Americanists, such as W. Carlos Williams, Hart Crane, and Wallace Stevens who aimed to defend an authentic American literature. However, despite his affiliation with the European tradition, Eliot was influenced by the

American tradition, particularly by Walt Whitman and Ralph Waldo Emerson, who initiated a true American literature free from European dominance. Eliot's intentional association with the European tradition, while hiding his American origin, is also accompanied by a desire to preserve historical sense, as he maintains in his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent", ("Tradition"), (Eliot,1920)when he writes:" The historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order." (Eliot,1920, p894). In this respect, any work of art does not emerge from nothingness, but rather interacts with other texts, in the same way as Julia Kristeva's theory of Intertextuality sustains. This process that makes any text to be read as a transformation of another text or group of other texts enables the reading of literary texts in relation with other texts or groups of other texts. For Kristeva, "each word (text) is an intersection of words (texts) where at least one other word (text) can be read", and "any text ... is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another". (Kristeva, 1986, p37).

In this study, I will present a nuanced argument about the Americanness of T.S. Eliot's poetry, despite his deliberate efforts to align himself with the European tradition. By analyzing Eliot's poem, *The Waste Land* (1922) in connection with Chaucer's "The General Prologue" to *The Canterbury Tales* (1387-1400), I intend to highlight how Eliot transforms traditional concepts from their European tradition into a new "Americanized" way.

Viktor Shklovsky's theory of defamiliarization is also discussed, as it helps to understand how Eliot innovatively and experimentally revitalized art and protected it from habituation, as "automatization eats away at things, at clothes, at furniture, at our wives, and at our fear of war." (Shklovsky, 1990, p. 4) I conclude by stating that Eliot's intended association with the European tradition and his deconstruction of traditional European perceptions in an "Americanized way" are significant contributions to Transatlantic Modernism. His influence, indeed, as a poet and critic significantly shaped and dominated Modernist poetry throughout the Twentieth century and long after. Eliot thus, establishes a sort of bridge between the European and American poetics he hybridizes, linking and enriching both the European and American literary traditions, in this way.

This work, hence, examines Eliot's use of lilacs in *The Waste Land* and its connection with Walt Whitman's use of the flower in "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed" ("When Lilacs") (1865) to demonstrate that both poets deal with the most debated themes of love and death in American literature. (Fielder, 1997, p. 11). While traditionally a symbol of renewal and rebirth, Whitman's innovative use associated lilacs with mourning, anguish, and death. Similarly, Eliot's use of lilacs connotes death, cruelty, memory, and unattainable desire, firmly placing him within the American literary tradition.

2. Eliot and the European Tradition: Deconstructing Spring

As a poet and critic with an internationalist perspective, Eliot showcases a keen interest in engaging with various cultural traditions. This cosmopolitan modernism is evident in his poetry,

which incorporates foreign words and allusions to European authors. In "The Waste Land," however, Eliot's depiction of spring contrasts sharply with the traditional celebration of the season found in European literature. While poets such as William Wordsworth, (Wordsworth,2014) William Blake (Blake, 1893), and Christina Rossetti (Rossetti, 2008) celebrated the beauty and joy of spring in British Romantic poetry, Eliot treats it in a satirical and ambiguous way. Even compared to Chaucer's majestic description of April in "The General Prologue" to *The Canterbury Tales*, Eliot's depiction of spring is far from reverential.

Traditionally, spring symbolizes love, joy, and rebirth, (Laumonier, 2021) but Eliot associates it with cruelty, death, and dullness, subverting the typical idea of spring as a time of rejuvenation and renewal. Instead, Eliot gives it a darker meaning associated with death and memory. A brief comparison between the opening lines of Chaucer's and Eliot's poems reveals this contrast clearly. Here are the characteristic lines of Chaucer's most celebrated descriptions of springtime:

*WHEN that April is, with his showers sweet,
The drought of March hath pierced to the root,
And bathed every vein in such licour,*

Of which virtue engender'd is the flower;(Chaucer, The Prologue, p1, lines 1-4).

From the first lines, the month of April is celebrated for it announces joyfully Spring, a season connected with happiness and rebirth. The poem evokes the delightful weather which engendered the beauty of nature, and its flowers:

*When Zephyrus eke with his swoote breath
Inspired hath in every holt and heath
The tender croppes and the younge sun
Hath in the Ram his halfe course y-run,
And smalle fowles make melody,*

That sleepen all the night with open eye, (Chaucer, The Prologue, p1, lines 5-10).

While Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* borrow to the *reverdief* genre when they evoke the "sweet breath "of April's winds," its sweet showers," the tender shoots "and the "small fowls " singing their "melody". Eliot's meaning of spring, on the opposite, is linked with cruelty, death, and dullness. Here is Eliot's most adverse description of spring:

*April is the cruelest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.* (Eliot, 1922, p.912, lines 1-4).

Even though the poem begins with the word "April is the cruelest month..." which is a direct echo of the opening line of Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*: "Whan that Aprille with his shoures soote", thus evoking earlier literary tradition, *The Waste Land*, nevertheless constitutes a significant

[†]The "reverdief" is a literary genre from the High Middle Ages that celebrates spring and love. It features themes of spring, love, and the beauty of nature, particularly during the months of April and May. Its stylistic conventions are not well-defined.

turn away from older and more established forms of English poetry. While Reveries, celebrate spring optimistically, Eliot, on the contrary, says negatively that "April is the cruellest month "since it breeds "lilacs out of the dead land". If traditionally, spring is always associated with a time of rejoicing, happiness, and renewal, where Nature re-clothes its green leaves, and trees and flowers are all flowing and blossoming, in Eliot's description it is paradoxically associated with both pain, and death, and memory and desire.

This departure from traditional European poetic styles launches a new and unique way of writing poetry, which is less English and more akin to the American Puritan tradition. It is noteworthy then, that Eliot's treatment of spring in "*The Waste Land*" shares a more striking resemblance to Walt Whitman's elegiac poem "When Lilacs " than to Chaucer's poem. In his poem, Whitman also links lilacs with death, using a mournful and elegiac tone to describe a sad spring. Therefore, Eliot's work is significant for any study of Modernist literature, particularly in relation to Transatlantic Modernism. His innovative use of language and his bold departure from conventional European poetic styles showcase his originality and creativity as a poet certainly, but make him even closer to Whitman and the American tradition.

3. Eliot's belonging to the American Tradition

In the context of the American tradition, Eliot's association with spring and mourning is reminiscent of the Puritan jeremiads of William Bradford (Bradford, 1962). While spring typically represents a new beginning, for Eliot it brings unfulfilled desire

and painful memories, continuing the cycle of suffering. This style of lament and protest was introduced by Bradford and continued by Whitman, who also saw spring as a time of mourning. Eliot's use of the image of lilacs in *The Waste Land* is a deliberate allusion to Whitman's "When Lilacs" which similarly associates spring with mourning and memory. The recurrence of spring serves as a reminder of what has been lost and the unfulfilled desires that remain. Eliot's use of the themes of love and death, places him firmly, and this according to Leslie Fielder, within the American tradition, rather than the European or English traditions. (Fielder, 1997).

4. Eliot's Americanness: Love and Death in *The Waste Land* and "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd"

4.1 The symbolism of Lilacs:

To highlight the Americanness of the poet, Eliot's use of symbols, particularly his use of lilacs in "The Waste Land" and its connection with Walt Whitman's use of the flower in "When Lilacs" is discussed in this section. Both poets use synesthesia, the mingling of sense perceptions, to transfigure pain into poetry. Lilacs are traditionally a symbol of renewal and rebirth, (Moulton, June, 2022) but Whitman's innovative use associated them with mourning, anguish, and death. Eliot's use of lilacs in "The Waste Land" also connotes death, cruelty, memory, and unattainable desire. Eliot's and Whitman's use of lilacs in their respective poems takes on significance as they imbue the flower with a new meaning, reversing the traditional meaning to stamp the American difference.

Despite Eliot's attempt to distance himself from Whitman's

personal style, Whitman's influence on his use of lilacs, is perceptible and significant in *The Waste Land*. Lilacs, traditionally a symbol of the renewal, and rebirth of the earth in spring, are now with Whitman's semiotic innovation, associated with mourning, anguish and death. And when we recall again the opening lines of *The Waste Land*, we can indeed hear the impact Whitman's lilacs had on Eliot in the way lilacs bred out of the dead land. The direct echoes of Whitman are undisputable, not just in the way that April acquires a sense of cruelty with its reminiscences of memory and desire, but in the same use of the adamant participles, "breeding, mixing", and "stirring"(Eliot,1922 p.912, lines 1-3) reverberating with "returning, blooming", and "drooping." (Whitman, 1865, p.74, lines 4-5)

The image of lilacs Eliot presents in *The Waste Land* is strikingly new and highly allusive to Whitman. Thus, it places him within the American tradition, rather than in the European, or the English tradition. Therefore, the presence of the lilacs is neither accidental nor innocent. He is consciously making allusion to the Walt Whitman poem, "When Lilacs". Here is Whitman's description of lilacs:

*When lilacs last in the door yard bloom'd,
And the great star early droop'd in the western sky in the
night, I mourn'd, and yet shall mourn with ever-returning
spring (Whitman, 1865, p. 74, lines1-3)*

Even though lilacs are blossoming in the dooryard, Spring for Whitman is not a happy event but rather a recurring occasion for mourning. Every returning spring will bring the memory of the lost " great star " which sank in" the western sky

in the night". Every returning spring will also be the time of remembering the person he loves mixing memory and desire exactly in the same way Eliot recalls spring: *Ever-returning spring, trinity sure to me you bring, Lilac blooming perennial and drooping star in the west, And thought of him I love.* (Whitman, 1865, p 74, lines 4-6)

Here, the significance of the lilac takes all its sense. In his one published memory of Jean Verdenal, (a friend who had a loving relationship with Eliot) Eliot recalls their last meeting in Paris, and it is marked with lilacs also:

I am willing to admit that my own retrospect is touched by a sentimental sunset, the memory of a friend coming across the Luxembourg Gardens in the late afternoon, waving a branch of lilac, a friend who was later (so far as I could find out) to be mixed with the mud of Gallipoli. (Eliot, 1934, p452).

This is the only confessional and autobiographical other public reference by Eliot to Jean Verdenal, which appeared some seventeen years after the Prufrock dedication.[‡]The biographical information and psychoanalytic reading of Eliot's poems betray his own recommendations on how a poem should be read, as autoletic. It seems paradoxical to the way Eliot wanted his readers to read and interpret his poems. It is especially contradicting his theory of "Impersonality" expressed in his essay, "*Tradition*" that "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion, it is not the expression of personality but an escape from personality". (Eliot, 1920, p899).

[‡]Eliot dedicated his first collection, *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917) to Verdenal.

Despite Eliot's avowed principle of "Impersonality", *The Waste Land* none the less suggests inwardness and introversion from a poet who assumes detachment from his subject.

Furthermore, the rich cultural significance of lilacs, including its deep-rooted history in Greek mythology and its association with manly love in Eastern symbolism[§], when explored will reveal significant meanings on Eliot's private and secret love affair with Jean Verdenal. The ambiguity of the gender of the hyacinth girl and the lack of gender-specific pronouns used in the passage describing a sexual encounter in a garden in section I, "The Burial of the Dead", suggest therefore a possible homoerotic reading of the passage.

John Peter in "A New Interpretation of the Waste Land", was the first to read *The Waste Land* as an elegy to Jean Verdenal and argues that same-sex mourning implies homosexuality (though the term is not mentioned). (Peter, 1969). Other critics such as Lyndall Gordon and J.E Miller suggest that Eliot's repressed feelings for his friend Jean Verdenal, are reflected in the *Waste Land*. (Gordon, 2001), (Miller, 2005, 2010). Therefore, I will explore the potential homoerotic subtext in Eliot's poem, particularly through the symbolism of the hyacinths to show the poet's personal experience of frustration and loss.

4.2 The symbolism of the hyacinths

The hyacinths in Eliot's *The Waste Land* could be interpreted as a symbol of Eliot's disavowed passion for his

[§]In Greek mythology, Pan was in love with a chaste nymph named Syrinx. She turned herself into a lilac shrub to escape Pan's advances, and he crafted his famous pan flute from the shrub's hollow stem.

beloved friend Jean Verdenal. Eliot's hyacinths while forming a significant subtext, have the effect of recalling sadness and longing and express his secret and silent pain. Although flowers are usually synonymous with many positive emotions and feelings, they are mostly connected to expressing mourning and loss by Eliot and Whitman. Their poems use spring and spring flowers as metaphors to express their feelings of grief, love, and affection to a dead person they never name. Both of their poems, with their elegiac tones, never name the person being mourned, indeed. Whitman's elegy never names the mourned person and we never hear the name of "him I loved":

*Ever-returning spring, trinity sure to me you bring,
Lilac blooming perennial and drooping star in the
west,
And thought of him I love. (Whitman, 1865, p.74, 4-6).*

Likewise, the subject of Eliot's elegy in *The Waste Land* is even more deeply buried. At first glance, the lines in the first section "The Burial of the Dead" seem to be pretty unambiguous because the hyacinth girl, who appears after a section filled with fragmented images of desolation and quotations from Richard Wagner's opera *Tristan und Isolde*, is initially assumed to be female due to the feminine pronoun "girl."

*'You gave me hyacinths first a year ago;
'They called me the hyacinth girl.'
(Eliot, 1922, p.913, lines 35-36)*

In fact, lines 35 and 36 seem to present an encounter between two lovers, where the hyacinth girl is offered hyacinths. However, because the hyacinth is phallic and associated with the

Greek myth of Hyacinthus, the gender of the hyacinth girl is ambiguous, leading to a possible homoerotic reading of the passage.**

— *Yet when we came back, late, from the Hyacinth garden,
Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not
Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither
Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,
Looking into the heart of light, the silence.
Od' und leer das Meer.
(Eliot, 1922, p.913, Lines 37-42)*

The "supposed" girl recalls an assumed sexual encounter in a garden: "You gave me hyacinths first a year ago". The speaker, again lacking a male pronoun, recalls the garden incident which left him speechless and blind. Although the passage is highly sensual and sexually suggestive, the attribution of gender roles is facilitated by the implied conventional roles because the personal pronouns do not say a lot about their gender identity. We are led to think that the male speaker initiates the act by giving flowers, whereas the female is rendered subordinate by the reference 'girl'.

**The gender of the hyacinth girl in the passage is ambiguous due to the phallic shape of the hyacinth, which is a fertility symbol originating from the Greek myth of Hyacinthus. The myth suggests a homoerotic reading of the passage, as the flower grows from the blood of the boy Hyacinthus, whom Apollo was in love with. It is proposed that the hyacinth girl is male or androgynous.

The ambiguity of gender is not only emphasized by the lack of gender-specific pronouns used in the passage describing the assumed sexual encounter in a garden, where the speaker offers the hyacinths to the girl, but the genderless hyacinth girl's identity of line 37 ("...your arms full and your hair wet") is further tied to the male drowned sailor, whose "pearly eyes" of line 48, p914 ("Those are pearls that were his eyes") evoking Jean Verdenal's drowning.

The Hyacinth mythical story, has similarities that are applicable to *The Waste Land*. It connotes with a frustrated wish and sadness over the loss of a loved person. A flash of the tragedy can be found in the symbol of the flower. Overall, the hyacinths in *The Waste Land* provide insight into Eliot's personal experiences and the themes of loss and longing that pervade his work. As critics have suggested, Eliot's repressed feelings for his friend Jean Verdenal, are echoed in the poem. Thus, an important key for the understanding of Eliot's murky or hidden presence, and the hindrance of his Americanness is provided by the study of *The Waste Land* as possibly homoerotic in subtext.

4.3 Bird Symbolism

David Moody notes that Eliot's early experiences in America remained a vital influence on his poetry, but Eliot chose to suppress explicitly American details in *The Waste Land* to give it an international turn (Moody, 1996). However, recent critics have pointed out that the reference to the hermit thrush's singing in the pine trees indicates Eliot's anxiety towards Walt Whitman, the prominent American poet. For Moody too, the most specific contribution to American poetry comes from the importance of the "water-dripping song" of the hermit-thrush. In fact, if on the

surface, *The Waste Land* is largely evocative of the European culture, beneath that surface, there is another inner layer more representative of the American life, and which finds expression in subtle representations, like the American hermit-thrush 's American bird songs found in Whitman's poems, "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" and "When Lilacs".

In "When Lilacs" and especially part 4 here is the hermit thrush song:

*In the swamp in secluded recesses,
A shy and hidden bird is warbling a song.
Solitary the thrush,
The hermit withdrawn to himself, avoiding the settlements,
Sings by himself a song.*

(Whitman, 1865, p.74, lines 18-22)

The use of the hermit-trush, as an American bird, instead of its English counterpart, the nightingale signals another trait of Eliot's Americanness and puts him along with Wallace Stevens, the Americanist poet who rejects the nightingale for his geographic and cultural remoteness from America, and advocates the use of American birds as symbols. Stevens' idea of the nightingale as an Old -World bird, coming from an environmental and educational elsewhere is crucial in his poem, "Autumn Refrain, ", for instance and that Joan Eagan was to observe in her article. (Egan, 1985). Stevens alluding to John Keats's poem, "Ode to a Nightingale," (Keats,2017), says that:

the nightingale

In measureless measures, not a bird for me

But the name of a bird and the name of a nameless air

Though I have never -- shall never hear that bird. (Stevens, 1932, p. lines 4-7)

Similarly, the hermit thrush's song in the pine trees in the "What the Thunder Said" section V of Eliot's *The Waste Land* is not only an echo of bird songs in Whitman's "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" and "When Lilacs", but a transgression to the 19th c established conventions and style of writing poetry. Hence, Eliot's representation of such an iconic American bird as the hermit thrush — a species often considered as the New World answer to the European nightingale establishes a proof that he is not following the European tradition but the American one:

But sound of water over a rock

Where the hermit-thrush sings in the pine trees

Drip drop drip drop drop drop

But there is no water. (Eliot, 1922, p.925, lines 356-359)

Although Eliot never acknowledges explicitly Whitman's influence on his poem, he is inevitably inspired by Whitman, the ornithologist. Consequently, when Eliot introduces the same birdsong into the *Waste Land* as Whitman did in his poem "When Lilacs", he is not only echoing Whitman, but alluding to him, and therefore placing himself quite firmly in the American tradition. Yet, while he adds references to William Shakespeare, Dante Alighieri, Christopher Marlowe, Charles Baudelaire, and

many other European writers, and their works, he never mentions Whitman.

Although lines 331-359 of section V "What the Thunder Said" present this time Eliot's own voice without the recourse to any apparent allusions to other writers, the hermit thrush's call at the end of this passage represents the suggestion of but a third American voice, no other than Whitman's voice.

When Eliot questions in line 360: "Who is the third who walks always beside you?" it alludes to the hermit thrush in Whitman, and resonates with Whitman's "When Lilacs". There is no doubt, then, that Eliot, in the succeeding lines, is clearly making allusion to Whitman:

*Who is the third who walks always beside you?
When I count, there are only you and I together
But when I look ahead up the white road
There is always another one walking beside you
Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded
I do not know whether a man or a woman
—But who is that on the other side of you?
(Eliot, 1922, p.926, lines 360-366)*

Now, for a little comparison here are Whitman's lines from section 14 of "When Lilacs":

*Then with the knowledge of death as walking one side
of me,
And the thought of death close-walking the other side
of me,*

*And I in the middle as with companions, and as
holding the hands of companions,
I fled forth to the hiding receiving night that talks not,
Down to the shores of the water, the path by the
swamp in the dimness,
To the solemn shadowy cedars and the ghostly pines
so still.*

*The gray-brown bird I know received us comrades
three*

*And he sang the carol of death, and a verse for him I
love. (Whitman, 1865, p.78, lines 120-128)*

Although Eliot draws openly from English and European sources, he keeps the American source hidden and never concedes his allegiance to the American tradition. Interestingly, the Whitmanian trace is erased and Eliot never acknowledges this influence with a note as he did with all the rest of *The Waste Land*, providing specific references, and making allusions to past authors. However, his use of bird symbolism in *The Waste Land*, with a focus on the American hermit-thrush indicates his Americanness for the hermit-thrush is seen as a more representative symbol of American life than the nightingale, which is closely associated with European romantic poets.

5. CONCLUSION

Overall, this article has emphasized the importance of recognizing Eliot's American roots in the analysis of his poetry. I argue that Eliot's use of innovative techniques, such as defamiliarization, and his exploration of themes of loss and longing, Eliot distances himself from traditional European

concepts, and transforms them into a new "Americanized" meaning. Thus, despite his intentional affiliation with the European tradition, his place within the American literary tradition is firmly acknowledged.

The article explored the significance of several motifs in Eliot's poem *The Waste Land*, which contribute to its overall Americanness. One of these motifs is the use of spring and mourning, which Eliot associates with the Puritan jeremiads of William Bradford and Walt Whitman. Rather than representing a time of renewal and rebirth, spring is for Eliot a reminder of unfulfilled desires and painful memories. It also examined the use of lilacs and hyacinths as symbols of death, memory, and desire, and how they relate to Eliot's homoerotic subtext. Another motif analyzed in the article is bird symbolism, specifically the use of the hermit-thrush as a representative symbol of American life. Eliot's use of the hermit-thrush is compared to Whitman's use of the same bird in his poem "When Lilacs" to highlight their thematic and stylistic affinities, showing the strong intertextual relationship binding the two poets. Eliot's rejection of the nightingale, a common symbol in European romantic poetry, underscores his desire to establish a distinct American literary tradition. Although Eliot never explicitly acknowledges Whitman's influence, the use of the hermit-thrush in both poets' works suggests inevitably a connection. Despite Eliot's incorporation of European references, and his attempts to distance himself from Whitman's personal style, I conclude that their use of these common motifs places them both firmly within the American literary tradition.

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