

# Intimations of the american character: five american writers



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America's only 230 years old, give or take, therefore to ask after the American character is much the same as asking after the character of a two-year old - not impossible, but hardly definitive. There's an anecdote of general reportage that on Nixon's first trip to China Kissinger asked Mao what he thought of the French Revolution. Mao answered that it was too soon to tell.

Perhaps it is too soon to tell what the American character is as can be determined in the literature of the 17th - 19th Centuries, but one cannot mistake that in the various works of its first significant authors (writers who felt themselves sufficiently invested in this democratic experiment spread over some six million square miles of beautiful and infinitely resourceful land) the first intimations if not indications of who and what we are (as opposed to where we came from - the old countries) make themselves known.

Harold Bloom, Professor, author, reader, man of extraordinary powers of memorization, idiosyncratic, self-proclaimed Falstaffian, wrote, ironically enough, a work entitled "The Anxiety of Influence." With reference only to the title, which implies so much, especially for any would-be artist who seeks place his/her own unique stamp on his/her work, one encounters the first problem for the truly creative: We are not born without context. Mozart aside, we must school ourselves, absorb, learn, model, mimic and copy before we write, paint, sing, play music, dance, in a wholly new and original way.

The struggle to achieve what is original implies its own anxiety. Like Michelangelo's slaves of marble, will we ever break free? Has American  
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broken free of its overwhelming British influences? And if we have broken free, if we have achieved a unique and American voice, to whom do we owe the credit for the great break with our bi-continental past? The important word here is context. No source is tapped in a vacuum. We are the progeny of forebears; we are the ancestors of those to come.

Time being what it is we can only look back. First, review the grim declamations of Jonathan Edwards and feel the anxiety of that faith which rested in an angry God, full of spit, fire and fury, an unhappy parent disappointed in his children, a God in a nominally Christian world, who's narrowed the avenue of salvation to inches of rock-ledge that can be traversed by so few that a minister's left with little to do but warn his congregation about how bad it's going to be when they're dropped like spiders into the eternal flame.

Of course, no God is ever as awful as his followers and Edwards' admonitions are the high point of that drive towards "purity" which drove the puritans from the corrupt Anglicanism of Elizabeth and James (not to mention Henry VIII who had his own take mercy and forgiveness). If one were to read too much of Jonathan Edwards, one might conclude that the American character is a dour, determined and fatalistic, the unfortunate result of Augustine's fear dripped through Calvin's Swiss rectitude by way of Anglo-Saxon provincialism played out in the hands and minds of truly brave pilgrims determined to reform themselves almost out of existence.

In short the first expression of America's self, its character, was a reaction to the wavering, the wiggle-room, and the corruption in late Elizabethan, Jamesian-Protestantism. It is the expression of what one people might

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attribute to a god who's angry with the failure of his children. But Edwards's declamations are not the word of god so much as their expression of man angry with man.

Ironically, the supposed anger of this god, by way of Edwards, will move Puritan congregation to embrace a work ethic (Protestant, New England, rural, elemental, purifying) which will stand in opposition to the source of the Reformation, itself - Luther's reading of Romans which asserts salvation by grace and not by good works. But time passed and America, with its depth and breadth of resourcefulness, its brave and entrepreneurial people who made the move, took the chance, crossed the ocean in search of a better life, and would not be held captive in the ornate chains of those ministers well-schooled in the endless dark night of the soul.

Brave people, entrepreneurs, the "can-do" sort of people who cross oceans are not the type of people to succumb to anxieties. And they are not without humor. Indeed they require humor, because humor is the step-sister of practicality. The ironic point of view, the wit, the clever turn of phrase, the creativity and intelligence of the comedic mode, are often the best means to drive home points and conclusions and directives that might otherwise be lost in the didactic drone of dogma.

Ben Franklin gave voice to humor and common sense and practicality in his writings. We look upon him now, perhaps unfortunately, as a cartoon figure of Disney's imagination, or that precious gent employed each early summer to dress up in velvet, lace and granny glasses, to walk the streets of Philadelphia and scare children with the stilted language of the poor mimic.

But to do so would be our loss. Franklin was a genius.

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He was a polymath, self educated and like most early Americans, born (as if dropped whole) into a new land affording infinite potential without the “ floors or ceilings” of given classes, gifted with the curiosity and intelligence to make sense out of the new, original American experience, and to express the process for others. He was an inventor, a newspaper man, a man of letters, a political in-fighter, a political theorist schooled in the writings of the Enlightenment.

He was a humanist who, unlike his ascetic Puritans ancestors of Boston and environs, believed that humans were of value, body, mind and spirit. Franklin dared to believe, in the most general sense of the lesser-dogmatic theists that man was deserving of something better than Edwards’s angry white bearded, sententious, demanding, unpredictable, inconsistent and contrary God.

Through Franklin the American character first developed the genius of common sense, leavened with humor. In the settlement of New York by the inveterate, humanistic Dutch and Philadelphia by the easy, peaceful, sometimes silent Quakers, Franklin, the man who traveled south, denied the anxiety driven, forbidding world view (so often fostered in too-cold climates) that sought to prepare man for eternity while denying the value of the here and now.

Through Franklin we learn that man is capable of creativity, here and now, that man can better his station in life, that life is worth living and that process, ritual, form and style (Franklin’s writing can not but reflect some of the 18th Century politesse) are meant to follow function and that substance, rather than appearance, is the determinative value.

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Throughout a review of Franklin's writings, one is struck by that wave of humanism and democratic values that asserted themselves in the wake of decadent royalties and courts and found their most eloquent expression in the preamble to America's Declaration of Independence, penned by Jefferson (edited, polished, affirmed, if not ghost written by Franklin. ) Emerson, the sage of Concord, virtually unknown in cocktail conversation today, but for the notion of some salty rigid circumspect New England self reliance, is the American writer with whom all American writers must contend.

Like America, itself, full of contradictions and principles that outran its very self, Emerson was an iconoclast, who looked about the beauty of Concord and saw that although the world was good, man made institutions, were, over time, necessarily corruptible and, instead of assisting the individual in his walk through life, ultimately hindered the individual from clear sight, a post-Christian pantheism, a transcendent vision of God's grandeur and all that can be deduced, derived from that.

In a way analogous to the solitary loneliness of the dark night of the soul, Emerson encouraged the brave entrepreneurial American, optimistic, human, and sufficiently wise not only to appreciate the comedic mode of life (i. e. , life is ultimately and always salvageable), but to travel past the thickets of dogma, to apply his gifted and most importantly his co-creative mind to an understanding of the world about him. Yes, the America might be the New Jerusalem, a new place of unbounded physical grace, but the kingdom must be experienced within as well.

Emerson's transcendent view is best appreciated when one posits the pure permeability of the divine through nature and then through the very self.

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Humanism need not stand in opposition to Edwards's angry god, but need only accommodate God, affording Him the place he's had forever, within and without ourselves. Thoreau lived a mile from Emerson. They were friends to the degree that that they could offer and receive friendship.

Both were complex, but Thoreau gave voice and body to complexities, contradictions that flowed from Emerson's first indications of a uniquely American voice. (All men are created equal, and yet Americans buy and sell slaves. ) Thoreau is a photographic negative to much of what Emerson implies. Though they both lived in this grand new country, Thoreau, the prophet, also recognized problems which would and still occur to this day in a country so bountiful it invited a work ethic as boundless as its resources, size and frontiers.

Work is a balm to the anxious and energetic soul. Perhaps it's too much to say that all work is busy work (though a walk down Park Avenue on a Monday in September might make one wonder), but work and the American's over-praise of the over-valued activity is a defense to work's essential nature - a distraction from the anxiety of being. Americans praise those Americans who work hard, keep their heads down, work hard, never look up, never question, and might ask after function but never purpose.

And these are the workers, the people, the men and women, who live the lives of quiet desperation. Thoreau is a radical in that he goes to the very source of an idea cloaked in so many assumptions and "givens" that the questioning itself renders him an iconoclast, an eccentric of the first order. Living alone by a pond is nothing compared to asking those questions which

might upset the underpinnings of a society too busy to ask anything. Thoreau loafs with the intensity of a Kant.

He questions not only the American way of life with its work ethic, but also the proposition that life's primary value lies in work and that through work (only work) man will find his identity, ultimately his purpose and after this life perhaps his salvation. Thoreau is a " loafer" like Whitman, but Thoreau does not loaf to escape work, he " loafs" to escape meaningless work and to question the assumptions of New England in the early 19th century

There's a cliché in the work-a-day world, devoted to the corporate mind and group think that sublimates the individual to the will and survival and perhaps betterment of the group. It is this: Nobody's indispensable. Thoreau either heard or intuited this dismissal of the human and his efforts (Willy Loman 100 years on), and said: Why do we engage in a system which demands our lives, makes false promises and considers us utterly dispensable? The American work ethic makes promises and offers the appearance of payback to justify itself. Indeed, such a charade is one underpinning of the capitalist system.

We're promised ticky-tacky houses, country clubs, swimmingpools, unlimited credit at usurious rates, nice clothes, the right schools for above-average kids, and of course the magical totem , the icon, the car, the uber-van, the humvee, the mode of transportation that will " tell them who we are. " Thoreau anticipated all of this - the uneasy contract by which Americans remain trapped in the first and second levels of the hierarchy of needs while our demi-gods of celebrity and power achieve a self-actualization denied



everybody else. Not surprisingly we are then bought off with television, sports, bread and circuses.

One of the contradictions in Thoreau is that the assertion of the individual is Romantic, but the means employed is ascetic and classical. To live deliberately is not to live with frippery or Boucher's swings or the ease of decadent courts. To live deliberately is a radical undertaking, directing the speedy to slow down to take time to loaf and view the smallest, finest things, those effects of creation which in their brief majesty put to shame all the useless memos, briefs, papers, efforts and transactions set down in the 19th Century's ethos of success and wealth as the outward sign of grace.

Thoreau stands in opposition to the America's madness for work. Walden has changed lives. People have been seen reading it during their rush commutes. Whitman turns within and explodes without. He does not so much challenge the hustle and bustle of the great democratic experiment as he seeks to encompass it, to swallow it, to take it in, because the genius of the poet - this new American poet - is begin enough, grand enough, to express the vastness of it all. Indeed every part of every part is a part of every part.

To turn within is to look without, to subsume the All. Whitman breaks the line open. Even a grade student looking at a poem by Whitman and a poem by Philip Freneau can't help but see the difference in form. The old and tired expresses itself in neat stanzas, century old rules. But Whitman's lines p the page. They scan and pose propositions only to complete the circle with their opposition stated like closing a door on a completed whole. The compliment forms the greater proposition.

This is a poet not so much of contradictions (though he admits as much), but a poet, like a demi-god, who can reconcile the apparent and real contradictions of life. Does America contradict itself (Slavery - All men are created equal)? Yes. Can America reconcile its contradictions? Perhaps. One war says we have; other wars say we have not. Perhaps it's too facile to remark that whereas the country was split north and south, Samuel Clemens, born in Missouri, a border state, obtained his unique voice traveling north and south along a river which in its own way sought to hold the warring halves together.

In Huckleberry Finn Twain reconciles the optimism and humor of Franklin, the adventuresome self-reliance of Emerson, Thoreau's marginal iconoclast and Whitman's reconciled over-soul. And yet, Mark Twain, the humorist, the colloquial voice of wisdom, the woolly relative we place at the head of the table, soon encountered, as America encountered the cracks and flaws of life, its random terribleness, its self-inflicted wounds.

At the very heart of the American character is the matter of slavery, the ludicrous contradiction of eloquence scripted to blow trumpets of gold and light bonfires of freedom that would out-enlighten the enlightenment. And still the ships came from the west coast of Africa. Slaves - bought and sold. These contradictions are essential. They are indicators of life itself and neither America, its character nor its poets and writers are immune.

Though we can look fondly on America's optimism, humor, practicality, favor of substance over form, the acknowledgment that form follows substance, that in America merit counts - we must also look upon the all too common type, born of the all too common fatigue evident in a country that offers just <https://assignbuster.com/intimations-of-the-american-character-five-american-writers/>

enough in a zero-sum game to keep the citizen alive one more day, for one more effort, for one more expenditure: We know the desperate worker, who expends enormous amounts of energy, convincing himself, fooling himself that what he does has meaning and purpose, that he's paid enough (as all those bleeding-heart liberal programs for all those minorities don't get in the way) and that someday, maybe when he retires with a weak heart and a spent spirit, he and his wife will travel the length and breadth of this great country and call to mind something of what that old gay poet wrote - something about atoms and bed-fellows and lilacs This too is the American character - desperate, tired, vain, prejudiced, spent, rigid, utterly human and, for all of it, ultimately forgivable.