

Hell in a Handbasket: The Absence of Hell in American Literature

Most students in American Literature are exposed quite early to Jonathan Edwards' famous sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." This sermon graphically informs the listener, the "you" of the speech, of the hand of God holding back the "fiery floods of the fierceness and wrath" of the mighty Divinity who is angry at the sin of the world. God, in this sermon, "holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked: his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire." The image is made more potent by the comparison of the listener to the spider in the presence of the omnipotent God. "You hang by a slender thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it, and ready every moment to singe it, and burn it asunder." But the horrific image is yet to come. "He will crush you under his feet without mercy; he will crush out your blood, and make it fly, and it shall be sprinkled on his garments, so as to stain all his raiment. . . . You shall be tormented in the presence of the holy angels, and in the presence of the Lamb."

I've always wondered about the wisdom of exposing students to this sermon so early in the semester when they feel ready and righteous. Maybe it would be better used at the end of the semester when they are laden with guilt over handing in assignments late and doing less than their best work! Seriously though, it is in the sermonic tradition and the Puritan poetry of writers such as Michael Wigglesworth and his "Day of Doom" in the mid-1600s that images of a wrathful God and a tangible hell exist. But search high and low for such portrayals in other

genres and you will only come up with the rare exception. Depictions of a “real” hell are few. A few plays have scenes: Abbot’s *Damn Yankees*, Bush-Fekete’s *Heaven Can Wait*, and Friedman’s *Steambath*. One might argue that George Lippard’s Devil-Bug has a hellish vision in *The Quaker City*. And the 1935 Spencer Tracy vehicle, *Dante’s Inferno*, certainly would fall into this category, as would the Star Trek episode, “The Cage,” in which aliens give Captain Christopher Pike a very real experience of hell as punishment for non-cooperation. Recent filmic versions of hell include the new agey *What Dreams May Come* and even the fantasy *Constantine*. We might talk here about some select poems, Williams’ “Kora in Hell,” Simic’s “A Wedding in Hell,” or Ciardi’s “Launcelot in Hell, but overwhelmingly, depictions of hell in American literature are generally pictures of “hells on earth” or in the minds of individuals. Even in Sterling Brown’s poem, “Slim in Hell,” Hell turns out to be the Jim Crow South. And Slim’s report back to St. Peter goes something like this:

St Peter said, "Well,
You got back quick.
How's the devil?
And what's his latest trick?"

And Slim say, Peter,
I really can't tell.
The place was Dixie
that I took for hell.

Then Peter say,
"You must be crazy, I vow
Where in hell
did you think hell was anyhow?"

In American literature, other than Edwards and the sermonic tradition, we really cannot sport a Milton or a Bunyan. The hells in our literary tradition are many, but they are earthly; in fact, they are so earthly that we become uncomfortable in their uncanny familiarity. We live in

and around these hells everyday. And even if we don't live in them now, they are a part of our mythic past as Americans. They haunt us and inform us of who we are and from whence we have come—and even more horrifying, of who we are always in danger of becoming again, which may hint at the reason for the great absence of hell in American letters. Edwards says toward the end of his sermon, “You have reason to wonder that you are not already in hell.” The absence of Hell in American literature and the many examples of hell on earth serve as our cultural response to Edwards’ statement. Our literature reflects that we have lived and sometimes are still living in hells of our own creation.

In an interview, Ezra Pound responded to the question of where he was living at the current time with, “In Hell.” The follow-up question was, “Which Hell?” He is reported to have put his hand over his heart, saying in response, “Here” (Hall 191). Pound much admired Dante, and what his poem “Homage to Sextus Propertius” does, in the words of one critic, is “to bring Hell forward from ancient belief to contemporary relevance, making it personal as well as universal. . .” (Pratt 116). Pratt contends that much of the power of the poem lies in the poet’s bringing the hell found in the human heart into the writing itself. Other writers have written about personal hells. William Styron’s *Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness* relates with precision the horror that is depression and how the life saving medical treatment saves him from the “Darkness Visible,” a clear reference to Milton’s creation of Hell in *Paradise Lost*. Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Pit and the Pendulum,” and Emily Dickinson’s goblin poems can be interpreted as hellish fragments of the speakers’ minds. Scenes of madness, frustration, self-doubt, and guilt are frequently presented as an internal hellish landscape. But for my purposes today, I’m more interested in hells which are created by the conditions of the society and culture around

characters. There's no way that I can do justice to this topic in the few minutes remaining, so let me just talk about several examples and try to draw some conclusions.

American women writers have used hell as a motif for the expression of oppression. Examples are everywhere, but Charlotte Perkins Gilman's famous story, "The Yellow Wallpaper," is the quintessential narrative. The female narrator of the story is married to a well-meaning young doctor. As the story progresses, we learn that she has recently had a baby for whom she has little or no feeling and is experiencing a mental state that we in this decade might call post-partum depression. Her husband, in trying to improve his wife's health, assures everyone that his wife is fine and is only suffering from a "slight hysterical tendency" (1). Being a "practical" man (1), John refuses to let her work or write, even taking away her paper at one point. He confines her to a country house without friends in an upper room with bars on the windows and an "unclean," "lurid" yellow wallpaper decorating the walls (3). Slowly, the isolation and lack of industry to busy her hands drives her to madness as she begins to imagine a female figure behind the pattern on the wallpaper, shaking it and wanting out (8). The one female figure becomes many women trying to escape. The narrator begins to pull the paper off the wall. As the narrative begins to disintegrate, like the speaker's mind, she says of the creeping women she imagines seeing, "I wonder if they all come out of that wallpaper as I did?" (14). At the end of the story, she is in total madness, and discovered by her mystified husband, she cries, "I've got out at last, . . . in spite of you and Jane. And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!"

This story shows in miniature, what women were feeling in the late 1800s in general. The societal restrictions on women's work, their public lives, their roles in homes, and even their

relations in society had become, in Gilman's view, like some warped prison described with language suited more for a description of hell than a old nursery—"smouldering," "sickly sulphur tint," "repellant, "revolting," and she even describes a spot on the paper that looks like "a broken neck and two bulbous eyes that stare at you upside down" (5). The creeping women and the narrator herself, creeping around and around the room in a long dress, hair down, oblivious to even her husband whom she creeps over after he faints from shock at the sight of her sounds much akin to descriptions found in Dante or Bunyan. What seems clear to me in passages such as this is that women in the nineteenth century needed a rhetorical stance to explain to a world desensitized to "seeing" the oppression and social injustice around them which would, in fact, help readers to identify and understand the oppression. Drawing upon the religious understanding of hell, sin, and guilt, they used pictures of women and others caught in a kind of earthy hell to make plain the suffering. Everyone could identify with the agony of being caught in hell, and everyone could understand the evil of creating such a hell for others—even if the hell was created by well-meaning actions.

Harriet Beecher Stowe, in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, shows Tom's sojourn through the "valley of slavery" beginning from a comfortable home and type of heavenly community on the Shelby's Kentucky plantation with its "flowery fields of ease and indulgence." But when financial ruin comes to the master of the plantation, Tom is sold "downriver" and gradually descends into his hell on earth. His next stop is the opulent St. Clare plantation in Louisiana--a "sunny Island, where generous hands concealed his chains with flowers." St. Clare's death rips Tom from the heathen luxuries of the "Moorish arches, slender pillars," and "oriental romance" of the plantation, into the dark heart of the Red River plantation, where "the last ray of earthly hope went out in night" (419). Legree's plantation, in Stowe's hands, becomes a type of hell itself.

The road to the plantation is “forsaken” and contained trees “hung with long wreaths of funeral black moss.” Moccasin snakes slide among “broken stumps and shattered branches” rotting in the dark water (488). The plantation house is guarded by four “ferocious-looking dogs” who seem in the narrative to be nothing but hell hounds (492). George Selby even refers to Legree as “the old Satan” (429). Legree's dictatorial rule is a harsh one with violently anti-religious overtones. Legree tells Tom, “This yer religion is all a mess of lying trumpery Ye'd better hold to me; I'm somebody, and can do something!” (401). Legree denies the value and veracity of the religion of Christ and demands that he be considered as “somebody.” He urges Tom to give up the “trash” of the church. “Im your church now!” (345) Legree says to Tom.

Sambo and Quimbo, Legree’s minions, are pictured as Satanic demons, animalistic and full of hatred. Cassy, Legree’s mulatto mistress, has “the devil” in her, in her own words, and uses the fears and ghosts of the place to haunt Legree and eventually secure her escape. Although Legree shows no fear of God or man, he is terrified of a lock of hair that reminds him of his dead mother (382). “Life and death to him [Legree--“the Godless man”] are haunted grounds, filled with goblin forms of vague and shadowy dread” (411).

Scenes of torture, death, and terror all are part of the normal operations of this plantation. What I find fascinating about Stowe’s picture of the South is not the hellish vision of the worst kind of slavery, but rather how she condemns even the sweet, gentle, loving slavery of the Shelby plantation. Slavery, Stowe argues, is against the will of God, and no person can be a just master—only God is the just master. For Stowe, there are degrees of Hell, and hell can appear benevolent and protective. But it is still a hell. But of Legree, Stowe has this to say in A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin: “To the pirate Legree the law gives a power which no man of woman born,

save One, ever was good enough to exercise" (39). As the representative of darkness and evil, Legree stands as the extreme representative of the slave system. Stowe is saying that a system which gives men the right to wield a power to which only God has a right, generates men of cruelty like Legree and creates a hell on earth for humanity—the very opposite of the kind of kingdom produced by the actions of kindness and self-sacrifice (of Tom through out the novel), the kingdom ruled by the perfect King and Master.

The anti-slavery literature of this country is full of allusions and depictions of hells created by the conditions in which the enslaved found themselves a part. Harriet Jacobs, the anonymous slave narratives, and others all tell of demonic deeds, torture, and burnings. We even find captivity narratives speaking of slavery among the native peoples in terms of being caught in hell. Mary Rowlandson even refers to her captors as “hell-hounds” at some point.

One of the most interesting and challenging pictures of hell happens on board ship in the Melville novella *Benito Cereno*. The novella, based on a real life slave insurrection, is one of the most disturbing creations of a moral, psychological, and spiritual hell I have ever encountered, and many scholars consider it a near perfect work of art. On a gray day, in which the entire sea was still, calm, and gray just like the sky, Captain Delano stumbles across another ship which looks to be in distress. A genial and naive fellow, Delano offers help and boards the ship. It seems to him to be “unreal” with “strange costumes, gestures, and faces” (7). Delano misreads every sign and gesture on the ship, thinking the cargo of slaves in fetters. Melville gives the readers hints all along the way that all is not as it seems, and yet when the real horror is revealed, we are still as shocked as the surprised and dupped Delano. When the moment of truth comes in the book, “past, present, and future seemed one” (67)—the ship becomes a place where time has

no meaning, where evil never goes away and torment reigns. “That moment, across the long-benighted mind of Captain Delano, a flash of revelation swept, illuminating . . . every enigmatic event of the day, as well as the entire past of the San Dominick” (68). The Black slaves brandish weapons “like delirious black dervises.” And when the bow of the ship swings around into view, the canvas covered beak is unveiled to reveal not a ship mascot under repair, but rather a human skeleton pinned to the front of the boat with the words chalked in, “Follow your leader” (69). A bloody battle ensues, but the violence is nothing compared to the realization of what the captive sailors had gone through at the hands of the mutinous slaves. Yet, inherent in the story is a sharp criticism of the blindness of the New Englander who has turned his eye to the slave trade, seeing only what he wants to see. Hells are created by ignorance and willing blindness and good intentions.

While certainly, C. S. Lewis’ statement that the “doors of hell are locked on the inside,” and that “all that are in hell, choose it” is valid, I believe that American literature takes some issue with that perspective alone. Over and over the message of our cultural literary product is that hellish existence is often the product of oppression, social injustice, lack of love for one another, and failure to measure up to the message of the gospel. In Matt. 23:33, Christ calls the Scribes and Pharisees a “generation of vipers” and warns them that they are headed for the damnation of Hell. These leaders were upholding their perception of right and wrong, the law, above the needs of the people. Jesus repeatedly demonstrated that caring for one another came above such rigid restrictions. Perhaps Chuck Colson says something valuable in the midst of many suspect things. “In a sense, the concept of hell gives meaning to our lives.” “It has significant social consequences. Without a conviction of ultimate justice, people’s sense of moral obligation dissolves, and social bonds are broke[n]” (sic). The call to social justice and

moral obligation is strong in American letters. Failure to respond with compassion and feeling and action results in hell on earth. I said earlier that the absence of hell in American literature and the many examples of hell on earth serve as our cultural response to Edwards and our early Puritan tradition of damnation and hell fire. Worrying about one's eternal damnation seems selfish in the face of such poverty, suffering, and abuse of our fellows. And the reverse is true as well. How can one be sure of eternal salvation when so much poverty, suffering, and abuse is allowed to go unchecked around us? How can we even begin to imagine that the Creator is pleased with us when we participate in injustice by turning a blind eye to pain? How often are we the benign slave master? How often are we the naive Captain Delano? The thrust of American literature in this context is to convict us of our own guilt and duty to others. That is the response to Edwards. Yes, we are in danger, but the pit we hover over is our own self destruction as a nation, as a culture. If we are to live out our lives following Christ, we must first pay attention to the marginalized and the untouchables. Closing the gates of the hells we create on earth might just lead to the closing of the gates of Hell forever.

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