The Escape Motif in the American Novel

*Mark Twain to Richard Wright*
Introductions:
Some Backgrounds and
Implications of the Escape Motif
The presence of escape, or flight, in the modern American novel has long reflected a dominant mood in American life. Indeed, wherever it appears in American literature—and it does so with astonishing frequency—it appears as a kind of obsessive accompaniment, a counterpoint to, or even a part of, the main structure of the story. The element of escape thrusts back to early American beginnings and beyond to the European past and the flight from Europe itself; mass escape in America (as distinct from individual escape, stressed in the following pages), which historians refer to as migration, reached its high tide in the opening and settling of the frontier and the conquering of the wilderness, or of what Henry Nash Smith has called the Virgin Land—the American West. This move into the West was perhaps the high point of escape from the older civilization, from an older, perhaps even an effete, way of life. But the deep—one might say chronic—urge of Americans to escape did not end with the closing of the frontier or the atrophy of the great optimistic strain in American life that reached its apogee just a few years before the beginning of the Civil War. For while frontiers disappeared and hopes died, the urge to escape—which created both the hopes and the frontiers—continued to exist as if the frontier were still there and as if all hope had not been abandoned. That impulse, because of its tenacity in American life and character, continued in spite of the loss of hope, in spite of the cessation of migration and the closing of the frontier by about 1880. Indeed, the very urge to escape—after the Civil War especially, but most especially in the twentieth century—was born out of desperation and hopelessness, so that escape finally became not so much an act of hope, optimism, and Emersonian self-reliance as of hopelessness and confusion.

Although the novels discussed in the following pages follow a chronological order, there has been no rigid attempt to trace
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the evolution of escape in the modern American novel strictly in those terms. The chronological design as it appears here is one of convenience rather than of intention; convenience, at least, was the larger consideration. If there seems to be some sort of developmental pattern in the choice, variation, and characterization of escapes and escapers, this development is probably organic rather than managed, part of the development of American life in the last half century or so, and the way our novelists have recorded that life. If there is a loose evolutionary pattern in the development of the modern American novel of escape, it lies in what I have found rather than in what I have sought. However, to deny that some sort of pattern exists, in the manner in which our novelists from Twain to Wright have dealt with the themes of escape, would be to blind ourselves to the changes that have occurred within American life itself. But there is a pattern of sorts. And though we would not wish to slight the common roots of all flight in the modern American novel, we must recognize that although flight is the common denominator of these works, the peculiarities of the historical periods that shaped and thrust them forth both into the national consciousness and the national literature also shaped and molded the characteristics of the individual work. Because of this it should be evident that the nature of Huck Finn's escape in the mid-nineteenth century (as the first of significant escapes in the modern American novel of escape) is quite different from, and sharply contrasts with, Bigger Thomas's escape in Native Son in the fourth decade of the twentieth century. Although for the most part the need of the escaper is to flee a difficult or dangerous situation, the first escape—Huck's—is still permeated with the optimistic glow so closely associated with the westward advance in America—at least, the time of Huck's escape was filled with optimism; the second is more a blind flight, where what was once an escape into the
Some Backgrounds and Implications

West does not push much further than the bounds of Bigger Thomas's labyrinthine ghetto.

Though escape generally implies a flight from one reality to another, escapism has a wider cluster of associations. For escapism implies a flight from daily "reality," 2 far less forgivable than literally running away from a society or situation. Escapism may take as many forms as there are escapists—from drugs and sex to an escape to a South Seas island, as Theron Ware at one point in Harold Frederic's novel longs to do. Usually, in our time, escapism has been exemplified by the passive mass audience and by various groups as represented by the Beats of the nineteen-fifties to the more prevalent and widespread hippies of the sixties and seventies. Where the Beats escaped into a world of disaffiliation, poetry, and pot, the hippies have made escapism itself more than simply a marginal way of life; it has become a life style itself that, in its less injurious forms—dress, hair styles, commercial appeal (psychedelic clothing stores and bookstores)—has been absorbed into the very establishment hippie-ism had set itself up to oppose.

One exception to all of this is made up of the protests and demands of the more vocal—and often violent—expressions of campus radical activists, many of whom turned out to be mutations of the Beat and hippie life styles. In terms of the Beats, however, and the later hippies, it is the dynamics of escapism rather than of true escape that are at work.

This study commences with an investigation of Mark Twain's Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1884)—perhaps the first of the modern escape novels—and ends with an examination of escape in two novels: Carson McCullers's The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter (1940) and Richard Wright's Native Son, also published in that same year. Although the motif of escape in McCullers's work is certainly not as dominant as it is in
Huckleberry Finn (unless the search for love itself is a form of escape), Jake Blount, the escaper in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter, though not the central character, is still in the main tradition of the escaper in the modern American novel of escape; significantly, however, Jake is an escaper who now no longer has a place to flee to—except down the road, to the next village, the next town, or the next county. The move to the West (as foreshadowed by Huck's flight across to the Territory) has atrophied into the twitch and reflex of the disjoined limb, a move limited to, or contained within, the region in which the original trauma occurred. Thus, there are no longer frontiers that a Jake Blount (or a Bigger Thomas in his black ghetto labyrinth) might explore or strike out for; there is no territory ahead either for a Jake Blount or a Bigger Thomas in the modern American novel of escape. They both now represent escape as a dead end. In a sense, this predicament sums up the major dilemma of our time (in terms of escape, that is), to the extent that the late President Kennedy ingeniously resorted to the campaign slogan of "The New Frontier" in order to dramatize the notion that if the old frontier was no longer there, there were at least other frontiers that one might strike out for. But one can be fairly certain that the appeal of the New Frontier, legitimate in its context as it was, had little to do with the business of escape in the following pages. Thus, for Jake Blount—as certainly not for Huck Finn—flight is the result of an individual spiritual and social bankruptcy. By the time we get to Jake Blount, the whole pattern of flight in the American novel since Huckleberry Finn has come full circle; it has reached dead end. Like Huck, Jake too might well say, "I been there before." Except that in Jake's case, there is no territory that he can light out for ahead of the rest. The territory ahead, as Wright Morris has put it, now lies behind us, in the past. There are no more territories, or, if there are, they have been staked out. And, besides, the Great Depression
effectively put an end to the buoyancy, hope, and optimism of the earlier frontier.

And Bigger Thomas in Wright’s *Native Son* does not even have the hope that a Jake Blount can nurse, illusory as Blount’s hope is. For in contrast to the other escapers discussed in the following pages, Bigger does not even have the solace of hope. He is trapped by his society as the rat he kills in the early pages of the novel is trapped by Bigger.

The opening up of the frontier gave the phenomenon of escape in the modern American novel its peculiarly American stamp. Although the theme of flight may be seen in other literatures, it is only in American literature, particularly in the American novel, that the preoccupation with flight begins to loom large, begins to represent what is most characteristically American—the urge to be forever wandering forward into new territories, to take to the Open Road, as Whitman chronicled that urge, to be on the move, as fictional Americans from Natty Bumppo to Kerouac’s Dean Moriarty have enacted it. This American preoccupation—the desertion of the old for the hope of the new—has been a deep and powerful force in American life since the landing of the Pilgrims at Plymouth Rock, in their own escape from social and religious persecution. The stream is not only deep but broad, sweeping along on its current not only escapers from Old World persecution but those escapers-in-reverse of some three centuries later, the expatriates of the 1920s, who look east rather than west in their attempt to escape what was a once-fresh optimism that had since degenerated into plain hucksterism.

In examining flight, or escape, as an American phenomenon, one also sees that Americans were as diverse in the manners in which they chose to flee as the broad diversity of the population from which most of the escapers came. Americans, in their search for the holy (or unholy) grail of raw experience, in
their quest for the self through escape, chose a variety of means; for every escape, even in terms of mass migration, was ultimately dependent upon the individual. Ultimately, all escapes are individual, even though the individual at times may himself be part of a larger escape—as were Lieutenant Henry in the retreat at Caporetto and Tom Joad in the westward migration of the Joads and other migrants from the dust bowl. But wherever the escape led, it led further, deeper into life, so that, as such, it rested on no airy philosophizings or aimless wanderings, but on a resolute decision to head somewhere; it meant leaving behind the old, or former places, where one not only fled the places but the identities that had grown up and become a part of those places. The move away from the earlier places was entirely pragmatic, bound up with the deep-grained American tradition of going out after something, looking it over—whether a homestead or a wilderness in which to build a home—and trying it out: Thoreau went to the woods; Whitman took to the open road; and Melville went to sea.

One major setting, or perhaps a goal, of escape in America has long been the woods, or the great forests. They are not simply a setting for escape but a haunting symbol of the restless American spirit searching for a quest. From the earliest days of our history as recorded in our literature—whether in the journals of the Pilgrims, the diaries of the Puritans, the notebooks of the gentlemen surveyors out of Virginia, or the more polished, self-conscious literature of Cooper, Irving, and Hawthorne—the woods have stood for something obsessive, mysterious, and, in troubled times, a place to escape into. One either actually went to the woods, as Thoreau did, or vicariously went to them by taking up a novel by Fenimore Cooper or Brockden Brown. From Brockden Brown through Fenimore Cooper and Hawthorne, the forest has sometimes represented the fact and, almost always, the symbol of escape. As I have suggested, the woods not only offered an escape from one form
of life, but their image appears and reappears in the writings of Thoreau: one went to the woods in order to plunge further into life; for only in the woods could one "front the essential facts of life." To Thoreau the woods beyond Concord represented that temporary escape from Concord—limited as it was—where he could begin to learn something about himself.

As the woods have represented a place to escape to, or even hide in, so each writer brought his own vision to them, a vision that largely determined the manner in which he viewed life. To the literary imagination the woods became a symbol of escape. In much of Hawthorne's work, especially the tales, the woods take on special significance, representing for Hawthorne's characters and symbolizing for us those forbidden freedoms that the pious settlements and their leaders frowned upon: in the tales the woods became the scene of witches' revels, sacrilegious rituals, Maypole merriments, or wilder orgies—in short, the idea made concrete of the revolt against the settlement civilization and the grim deity that presided over that civilization.

In the works of Cooper and Twain, though the woods are still there, they have been pushed farther west and do not seem to frown down upon the trailblazer so threateningly; nor do they reecho any longer with the revels of witches. (Hawthorne, of course, coming after Cooper, dealt with the woods of pre-Cooper times; when Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale plan their abortive escape from the village of Boston, they go to the woods to do so.) In Cooper the woods have become more attractive, for the reader if not for those who strike out into them. Cooper's hero, whether as Leatherstocking, Deerslayer, or Natty, may be cautious about the woods, for they still pose a threat; but they do so largely in terms of this world rather than the next. The woods are no longer the dark world of the "powers of blackness" run rampant, but a mottled world where nothing more magical is hidden than the cool waters of a rushing spring. There is now room for the play of an occasional
shaft of sunlight; and the devil (or devils) that may inhabit that world often turn out to be substantially more material than their predecessors; they may even be a tribe of hostile Indians or a clan of suspicious squatters led by a fierce Ishmael Bush. If the dangers as represented by Indians or squatters are there, they are at least dangers that can be coped with in a manner best suited to this world; and if the presence of these forces threatens sufferings, then at least these will be sufferings of a temporary, if not a temporal, nature. Leatherstocking rarely contemplates suffering in its eternal form; it is enough for him if he can take care of those more substantial (if less spiritually consequential) threats to life and limb. Yet Natty considers the woods even less of a threat than the settlements he chronically flees. These to Natty and his various avatars represent the true danger; and one can be fairly sure that, because of this concern in that time of first frontiers, Fenimore Cooper’s hero is not merely an early example of the Western hero (to be more weakly melodramatized in the later dime novel), as Henry Nash Smith has suggested, but the prototypical escaper in the modern American novel of escape.

When we get to Huckleberry Finn, the woods have taken on a more attractive appeal: they have become idyllic. Huck can now divest himself of all those cramping restrictions of the Widow and Miss Watson, all of those feminizing influences to which even Twain himself was partly victim. The woods now, for the most part, are sunlit, and the Puritan darkness or the less sinister shadows of Indians and squatters have virtually vanished. If there are shadows now, they are likely to be those cast by the shade of a cottonwood offering protection against the heat of the sun to the youngster who has come up from the river or the swimming hole to find cool relief in that shade. In the woods one can pretty much do as he pleases. When Huck is taken by his father into the woods, as much as he fears the
man, he is even more happy to leave Saint Petersburg. As he tells us, "It was kind of lazy and jolly, laying off comfortable all day, smoking and fishing, and no books nor study. It was pretty good times up in the woods, take it all around."

But the woods are not the only sanctuary toward which one might direct one's flight, no matter how "lovely, dark, and deep" they may be. At the turn of the century, escape meant a withdrawal from the woods, or at least from those clearings in the woods that had become settlements, which in their turn had grown into villages and small towns. Thus, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries escape took the form of what Carl Van Doren had called "the revolt from the village," in which the escaper deserted his own hometown to head for the city, an escape that became dominant both in American life and literature in the first quarter of the twentieth century, and that continues to some degree even to this day. In the following pages, I have attempted to take a closer look at some of these escapes that have become such an intrinsic part of the American legend and certainly of American life itself. If the escape has frequently been self-defeating, that does not invalidate its intensity. On the contrary, the very scope of its failure has often been the measure of its necessity—and even of its pragmatic success in terms of its example to others.


2. As used here, the word is employed in its usual phenomenal sense rather than in all of its fine philosophical shades of meaning.