

VISIONS AND RE-ENVISIONS OF ADAM IN AMERICA. VIORICA PATEA and MARÍA EUGENIA DÍAZ, eds. *Critical Essays on the Myth of the American Adam*. Salamanca: Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca, 2001.

The new man, the new Adam, befits a lonely self-made man without a past but looking forward to the future and the fulfilling of his expectations. However, what lies ahead of him is not always flawless. R.W.B. Lewis avows that the resulting experience of the American Adam may be depicted either as successful (“the party of hope” writers) or as a new fall (“the party of memory” writers). Almost half a century after the publication of this book, the International Symposium on the Myth of the American Adam, organised by María Eugenia Díaz at Universidad de Salamanca last 1999 revised Lewis’s study and proved its current validity in a myriad of works, authors and cultural aspects. Out of the success of the conference this edition comes out with a series of essays on the subject. The outcome is an extensive compilation where several experts offer a new interpretation of the works they analyse from the perspective of American mythology.

Thirteen essays compose *Critical Essays*, the first of which renders a thorough exegetic exposition of the myth, its origins, birth, establishment, and development. The point of departure for this exhaustive diachronic study is the first Adamic figure: the biblical Adam. Once Patea establishes the basis for the definition of the myth, she goes on to analyse the myth from a mythogenetic point of view, that is, how this myth dealing with the American identity is, in contrast to traditional myths, consciously shaped rather than culturally inherited. According to Patea, although several critics such as D.H. Lawrence in the 1920s and onwards attempted to define what means to be an American by focusing on the “quest of newness” (21), it was not until 1955 that Lewis clearly developed the concept of American identity on an artificial “neo-Adamic” mythical basis. His leadoff study, which caused an enormous amount of controversy among other critics that considered it to be the anachronic result of the Cold War, points out that “American literature adopted Adam’s story

of the fall as its primary narrative pattern in an effort to link the American experience of the new land to the experience of the first man on earth” (26). This new experience, however, will entail either an optimistic ending for “the party of hope” writers or a new fall for “the party of memory” writers in a both Edenic and dark garden whose limits are continuously being tested by the innocent new Adam. Doubtless, this opening essay is an in-depth and excellent analysis of the myth which may reveal obscure or concealed key concepts to those who are already instructed in American mythology. Those who lack this knowledge will find in the introduction to this book a sound basis for the literary criticism of the American identity in literature.

Twelve essays, chronologically arranged, follow Patea’s exhaustive dissection of the myth, but, contrary to expectations, they are not entirely devoted to nineteenth-century works and writers. Ranging from American critic Grace Tiffany’s concern with Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* to expert John Whalen-Brige’s revision of Norman Mailer’s political Adams, these articles can be clearly divided into three groups, yet this is not specifically stated by the editors. The first body of essays includes those concentrating on works, authors and concepts developed before the nineteenth century, the second one deals with nineteenth-century literature, and the last one turns to the twentieth century.

Although Lewis’s regard was to do with nineteenth-century literature, a group of articles in *Critical Essays* searches for the first occurrences of the myth prior to that century. Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, Tiffany argues, is one of the first accounts of man’s prospects to return to innocence in the New World. In this case, despite Shakespeare’s final pessimistic vision, an Edenic emplacement resembling America is presented as the setting where the regeneration of man may become true, as “a utopia free of old-world vices” (47). By contrast, Jay Hansford C. Vest considers in his essay the concepts of Christ Bearer and Dawn Bringer as he opposes Christian mythology to Native-American myths. His last claim undoubtedly relates the first man in America to the Native-Americans imprisoned within the walls of a garden controlled by alien forces.



Some of the greatest nineteenth-century writers turn to be the core of the second group of essays. Firstly, Bernd Herzogenrath relates the concept of belatedness defined as “the law and the temporality of language, culture, and the signifier” (68) to the myth of the American Adam and individualism as disclosed in Cooper’s *Leatherstocking Tales*. In the second essay, a new perspective is added: that of the American Eve in the new Eden. Paul Scott Derrick examines this aspect as he explores the different stages in Emily Dickinson’s poetry from christian-oriented to romanticism and finally existentialism. The following article in this second group is Patea’s analysis of the figures of the poet and the scientist in the works of Hawthorne, Emerson, and Whitman, as self-made supermen whose new position is not that of subordinate and recipient subjects in the process of creation but that of makers themselves. Félix Martín’s essay’s interest has to do with the works of Whitman and Crane in order to find reminiscences of the nineteenth-century American Adam and present Whitman as Adam himself. Harold K. Bush’s survey, the last of this series, goes over religious criticism and Darwinism as embodied in Mark Twain’s American Adam who represents both goodness and depravity, the innocence and the fall.

Finally, the third group undertakes the twentieth century. Halfway between the nineteenth and twentieth century, in the first essay Francisco Cabezas separates from the myth in order to focus on the scientific figure of the Darwinian first man, the ape, and then focuses

on the works of writers of naturalism Frank Norris, Jack London and Theodore Dreiser and how they depict in their novels the back to the beast, the necessity to rely on instinct again in order to survive in the city jungle. Secondly, Díaz deals with the character of Thomas Sutpen, the self-made man in William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*, who, after losing his primal innocence on the differences between classes in society, regains paradise in the shape of a plantation. Following Díaz’s article, Phil Melling’s centres on American literature of the 90s and on the latest American Adams such as the members of the suicidal sect Heaven’s Gate who consciously look for their new Eden in the afterlife. John Whalen-Bridge approaches the Adamic myth in Norman Mailer’s *Harlot’s Ghost* as the American Adam becomes a CIA agent. For Mailer, Whalen-Bridge states, just as good and evil coexist so does Adam before and after the fall. Innocence also becomes the key to interpret his Adam, but while Lewis observed that the American Adam was bereft of history, Mailer exposes his Adam to history represented by the ghosts of the past. Finally, Juan José Coy revises William Kennedy’s works so as to show the raise of catholic, poor, and Irish American Adams looking for a successful new beginning.

*Critical Essays* is a sound book of criticism. Its interest derives from the multiplicity of perspectives on the myth of the American Adam which are offered by reputable experts with new interpretations of the myth of a very high quality.

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