THE AMERICAN IMMIGRANT IN FICTION

by

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[1] Vilhelm Moberg, The Emigrants (New York: Simon and [illegible], 1951), pp. 91-92.

INTRODUCTION

People streamed from Europe driven to a new land by the lack of food and the lack of land, by the presence of peasant fears and the presence of racial and religious persecution, by the love of adventure and a plan for a richer life, by the hope for a more generous future and the dread of a continued oppression. It is conceded that most who wanted to come were poor or despairing, harrassed or discontented, but only the courageous and optimistic dared to come. Many others who chose to migrate could have continued to lead comfortable lives in Europe, but curiosity about America and confidence in its future influenced them to transfer.

> Only the bold and enterprising have sufficient courage: they are the instruments which stir up the tranquil hamlets and shake the order of unchangeableness. These separate from the multitude and fill a few small ships---a trickle here and there starts the running stream which in due time swells to a mighty river.[1]

The crossing was often marked by diseases of body and mind, by deprivation of needs, physical and spiritual, and by humiliation of landsmen on the sea and individuals in a herd. In the nineteenth century, migration was in many ways a voluntary sacrifice of self, for accommodations were crude and hazards were many. The United States had

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[1] Vilhelm Moberg, The Emigrants (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1951), pp. 91-92.

opened its gates to the tired, the poor, and the homeless, but had made few provisions for them; moreover, the new world welcomed both the prosperous and the poverty-stricken with promises of equality and opportunity, but the realities were often swindlers, tenements, sweatshops and sod huts. Each settler chose the best location available and began automatically the long, usually difficult, period of adjustment. Hunger, fear, and emotional conflict continued to be factors in the lives of many.

Between 1815 and 1914 fifty million people left Europe; of that number, thirty-five million entered and stayed in the United States. These immigrants voluntarily uprooted themselves from the old environment in order to seek sustenance and fortune in new surroundings; theirs was the major decision to leave native soils and come to a land of strange ways, alien speech, and uncertain futures. The greatest movement of population known to the world thus occurred, and the impact of this mass transfer profoundly affected the still fluid American culture and character.

> In essence all American history has been the outcome. Since the Indian played mostly a negative role in the nation's evolution, the history of the United States is in considerable part the story of these successive waves of humanity, their adaptation to a new environment and the adjustment of the older population to their presence.[2]

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[2]Arthur M. Schlesinger, Paths to the Present (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1949), p. 52.

The great migrations of those who were to become the American people and the effect of that movement on America, its natives and the foreign-born, were experiences which cried out for expression; men, simple and learned, sought words and literary forms suitable to relate that transplantation. The words were old, usually those of native languages; the forms were old and new---letters, the foreign-language press, immigrant autobiographies, travelogues, and fiction. The letters, newspapers and "America books" were written during the movement by involved individuals. The fiction which has grown up around the immigrant character was written during the period and is being written now; it differs in approach and purpose from the other literary forms used. Fiction portrays by symbols to leave an impression and does not report with details; it is excused for exaggerations and is often aided by the time which has lapsed since the event occurred. As fiction it is the tool of the author; it can attack or defend, it can produce sympathy or amusement. Since the immigrant was depicted through fiction, and since he has chosen it as a medium for self-expression, this literary form does present the impact of the immigrant on America. As creator and character, the immigrant has influenced literature; through this influence his greater contributions to American life can be measured.

IMMIGRANT EXPRESSION THROUGH NONFICTION

Persons involved in the great migrations were willing, indeed eager, to relate their experiences of the crossing and upon arrival in the new world. Generally they spoke with fidelity to the truth, for they wrote for an audience of friends and relatives left behind. In some cases these authors desired to settle the question of departure for others, and they wrote to encourage or to discourage that step; in other cases they desired only to notify European comrades of their fates, and then perhaps they might exaggerate conditions a little; in still other cases, the newcomers desired to maintain their links of communication with their native lands, and they struggled to establish a foreign-language press to meet their need. This body of immigrant literature, made up of letters, newspapers, and "America books," tells a story of the United States not to be found in a historical survey, a story written by witnesses who did not realize their historical significance.

One of the simplest and most often used means of expression was the private or public letter written by one migrant to another or by those who resettled to those who remained in the old country. This correspondence is referred to collectively as the "America letters." Through these contemporary sources the outstanding aspects

of the westward surge are revealed; further, they compose a diary of simple but daring people in transition, "the voice of America."[3]

> Translated into English, these letters illustrate the value of a very large body of historical material. . . .They record the experiences, observations, and thoughts of immigrants who made their way in the New World and shared in the building of the nation. . . .Read and studied with care, they afford new insight into the American past while at the same time they reflect the image of America that was projected into the minds of Europeans in an era when millions were crossing the seas and moving west.[4]

These letters played an important role in the migration movement as they helped to shape the European image of America; they witnessed to the America of fact and not to the America of fiction. In Europe they were read and distributed by villages; many were published by newspapers, and all were highly treasured. Of final significance, the "America letters" had a human touch that removed the immigrant from the realm of statistics; they revealed the newcomers as human beings who had made a decision and were experiencing its consequences.

For many new Americans the letter was an insufficient literary form; they sought a more extensive, more permanent means of communication, and as books became more accessible,

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[3]Theodore C. Blegen, Land of Their Choice: The Immigrants Write Home (St. Paul: The University of Minnesota Press, 1955), p. viii.

[4]Ibid., v.

this method was chosen. The first "America books" were, in effect, long letters, for these also were to provide information and to correct misconceptions. Ole Rynning, author of the first Norwegian guidebook, explained that his purpose was "to answer every question that I myself raised."

> To make clear every point in regard to which I observed that people were in ignorance, and to refute the false reports that came to my ears, partly before my departure from Norway and partly after my arrival here.[5]

Other "America books" were simply travel accounts, thorough descriptions of the crossing or of journeys and life in the new world. Another group traced the wanderings of a specific sect or nationality, measuring its adjustment or marking its contributions to America. These would be the most valuable from a historian's viewpoint, but few have survived and are available in English.

A special form of the "America book" is the immigrant autobiography, usually written to trace the progress made by an individual in his adopted country. These are both numerous and valuable. The lives they present are often those of great Americans who were, at one time, newcomers adjusting to a strange land. In the introduction to Edward Bok's autobiography this explanation is given:

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[5] Ibid., vi.

> The title suggests my principal reason for writing the book. Every life has some interest and significance; mine, perhaps, a special one. Here was a little Dutch boy unceremoniously set down in America unable to make himself understood or even to know what persons were saying; his education was extremely limited, practically negligible; and yet, by some curious decree of fate, he was destined to write, for a period of years, to the largest body of readers ever addressed by an American editor. . . .How all this came about, how such a boy, with every disadvantage to overcome, was able, apparently, to "made good"---this possesses an interest and for some, perhaps, a value which, after all, is the only reason for any book.[6]

Still other writers had a different motive, to trace through their personal experiences the rising hope for oppressed minorities. Mary Antin, a Russian Jew, has produced such a book. "Although I have written a genuine personal memoir," she says,

> I believe that its chief interest lies in the fact that it is illustrative of scores of unwritten lives. I am only one of many whose fate it has been to live a page of modern history. We are the strands of the cable that binds the Old World to the New. As the ships that brought us link the shores of Europe and America, so our lives span the bitter sea of racial differences and misunderstandings. . . .Happening when it did, the emigration became of the most vital importance to me personally. All the processes of uprooting, transportation, replanting, acclimatization, and development took place in my own soul. I felt the pang, the fear, the wonder, and the joy of it. I can never forget, for I bear the scars.[7]

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[6]Edward Bok, The Americanization of Edward Bok: An Autobiography (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1930), pp. viii-ix.

[7]Mary Antin, The Promised Land (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1946), pp. xiii-xiv.

Both "America letters" and "America books" served the immigrants as means of communicating new experiences, and thus they could inform the old world about the new. There was a second vital need for the group, however; this was simply to inform those in the new world about the old. The newcomers were strangers in America, and as strangers many were lonely, afraid, and helpless. To combat these conditions the immigrants banded together; to combat their need for communication with Europe they organized the foreign-language press. These newspapers served also to keep isolated groups informed about scattered comrades and relatives in America; contact within a nationality could be maintained best by a private paper. The foreign-language press served a third vital function; it was an extremely popular textbook and guide to America, written in the immigrant's tongue and from his point of view. The surprising popularity of the newspaper as a guide among peasants has been explained in Robert Park's study of the Immigrant Press.

> One reason why immigrant peoples read more in America than they do at home is because there is more going on that they need to know. There is more novelty and more news. News is a kind of urgent information that men use in making adjustments to a new environment, in changing old habits, and in forming new opinions.[8]

The final service of this press was to act as a publishing

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[8]Robert E. Park, The Immigrant Press and Its Control (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1922), p. 9.

house for the body of immigrant literature which was written in America; simple and educated men could express themselves in poetry and other art forms, and through the private papers all newcomers could share in the creations of their fellows. The foreign-language press is most important for its insight into the personal lives of immigrants.

The fourth medium of immigrant expression was that of fiction, primarily the novel, and those of the transition participated as creator and character. The approach and purpose of this form differ from those of the forms previously discussed, but the authors, their motives, their themes, and their techniques, are equally significant in measuring the immigrant's impact on America. Fiction was a unique means of expression, and, drawing a conclusion from the mass which has accumulated and survived, it was the most satisfactory.

AUTHORS OF IMMIGRANT FICTION

The authors who write fiction concerning the immigrant are a heterogeneous group. Some of them are Americans, while others were born in Europe. Prolific authors, "best-seller" producers, and creators of a single book all feel the necessity to speak. In many novels the immigrant appears as a central theme, and in many others he is introduced as a factor in a broader picture. The tone used might be that of sympathy or sarcasm. A large number of the writers have experienced personally the fears and discomforts of a migration, but others have experienced those same sensations indirectly through tales told or read. Many authors are crusaders or propagandists, and many others simply have a story to tell. Among the writers of this literature are numerous and apparent differences. At the same time, they share a stronger and more obvious similarity; this is an interest in the immigrant, an interest strong enough to compel a word picture. Motives, techniques, and forms differ markedly, but these authors voice concern for the immigrant, concern which may be expressed in a poem, a short story, a novel, or a play. This topic cannot be a casual one, for when writing of human beings who have been through the crisis of migration more than a passing interest is required; the author must be deeply involved

with his subject. These artists fall into five general categories, and outstanding representatives of each can be used to examine the reasons for the production of this literature.

As would be expected, most authors of this school have somehow gained through personal experience a knowledge of the process of migration. A good many of them were actually participants in the westward surge from Europe; they knew the immigrants's fears, hopes, and fates in a new land and wrote their tales with passion. The most outstanding example of the immigrant-author is the Norwegian, Ole Edvart Rolvaag born in 1876 on an island at the Arctic Circle. Dissatisfied with his life as an illiterate fisherman, he made the great decision to migrate and arrived in the United States in 1896 with nothing in his pocket but a railway ticket to South Dakota. Having settled in the Great Plains, he tried farming and odd jobs, but feeling that America had more than this to offer, he saved his money and went to school. Rolvaag earned a college degree, but his knowledge cannot be measured by this standard alone.

> In the larger sense. . .his education has been gotten from life which he seems to have lived with a rich and daring intensity; and it is his own venturesome experience, certainly, that finds expression in the creative realism and brooding imagination of his work.[9]

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[9]Vernon Louis Parrington, "Editor's Introduction" to O.E. Rolvaag, Giants in the Earth (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1929), p. xix.

He wrote in his native tongue, but his subject became a unique American one. The setting of his novels was a scene familiar and meaningful to him, as he wrote of Norwegians in America, of pioneering at its grimmest, and of sacrifices of mind and body both by the weak and the strong. Per Hansa of Giants in the Earth is, in a sense, autobiographical, for he is courageous and sees the promise of America.

> And so Per Hansa could not be still for a moment. A divine restlessness ran in his blood; he strode forward with outstretched arms toward the wonders of the future, already partly realized. He seemed to have the elfin, playful spirit of a boy; at times he was irresistible; he had to caress everything that he came near. . . .But he never could be still. . . .Wherever he went, no matter how far, he found the same kind of soil. . .Endless it was, and wonderful![10]

Rolvaag wrote of the immigrant as an immigrant. "He felt that the inner truth of Norwegian-American immigration could be written only by one who had experienced the transplanting of life, who shared the psychology of settlers."[11] There are many other authors like him, men and women who write to share an experience. Louis Adamic, the well-known journalist, is an immigrant author. Born in an Austrian province in 1899, he came to America in 1913,

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[10] O. E. Rolvaag, Giants in the Earth (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1929), p. 112.

[11] Lincoln Concord, "Introduction" to O. E. Rolvaag, Giants in the Earth (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1929), p. xxxi.

and did odd jobs before joining the United States Army. His works present some of the main problems of the immigrant and deal with motives for migration, autobiographical details, and in one, The Native's Return, his complete Americanization. Another immigrant-author, Sholem Asch, is a famous writer and naturalized American. Born in Poland in 1880, he has written much about his people, the Jews, and their place in the old world and the new.

Among the immigrant group, the autobiographical novel is most common; an excellent example is The Rise of David Levinsky. Written by Abraham Cahan, a Russian Jew who came to the United States in 1882 and was naturalized, it focuses on a Russian Jew and traces his progress in the New York clothing industry; the novel contains detailed pictures of New York's East Side and is realistic. The list of immigrant-authors includes Ludwig Lewisohn, a German Jew, Elias Tobenkin, a Russian, David Cornel DeJong, a Dutchman, and many others. A tribute to Rolvaag is appropriate for all of them:

> The artist has lived with these peasant folk; he is one of them, and he penetrates sympathetically to the simple kindly hearts hidden to alien eyes by the unfamiliar folk ways. To gather up and preserve in letters these diverse folk strains before they are submerged and lost in the common American Mores, would seem to be a business that our fiction might undertake with profit.[12]

A second large group of authors who wrote about

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[12]Parrington, loc. cit., p. xix.

the participants in this transplantation are those who write of the transfer from a different point of view. This group consists of the second generation of immigrants, children who generally adjusted to the new world more rapidly than did their parents. They also knew the doubts, fears, hopes and fates of the immigrants and write of the trials of their elders. Some speak bitterly of their "greenhorn" parents and use sarcastic tones; most speak sympathetically of relatives or friends and use kind tones. One of the best representatives of this group is Jerre Mangione, the American-born child of Sicilian-born parents. His novel, Mount Allegro, is affectionately informal and has an autobiographical flavor. The opening paragraph identifies the special problem of the second generation.

> "When I grow up I want to be an American," Giustina said.
>
> "We're Americans right now," I said. "Miss Zimmerman says if you're born here you're an American."
>
> "Aw, she's nuts," Joe said. He had no use for most teachers. "We're Italians. If y' don't believe me ask Pop." But my father wasn't very helpful.
>
> "Your children will be Americani. But you, my son, are half-and-half."[13]

Mangione stated the motive for his literary effort in simple terms:

> I was tired of sociological books about the foreign-born and of novels about them that strove for dramatic effects at the expense

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[13]Jerre Mangione, Mount Allegro (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1942), p. 1.

> of everything else. . . .I hope that my book will not only contribute to a better understanding of Sicilians and, to some degree, of Italians, but will also serve as an impetus to those creative writers who are familiar with similar materials about other minority groups.[14]

Another excellent example is Pietro Di Donato, author of Christ in Concrete. This novel is also autobiographical, and traces the life of the American-born son of Italian immigrants. Di Donato did have a father who was a bricklayer and was killed when a faulty building collapsed; he probably did hear his dead father described by the police as "the wop under the wrappin' paper."[15] Finally, he did leave grammar school to become a bricklayer himself. He writes from bitter experience and knowledge; his story is a harsh yet tender one written in the spoken dialect of the American-Italians. These two works are quite different, one is amusing and the other is depressing, yet both are written by those who experienced the pains of adjustment.

A third second-generation author is Edna Ferber, the daughter of a Hungarian Jew; however, she has written much and is concerned with immigrants, the Poles in New England, as one of many social issues. In most cases, the authors of the second generation are more objective than the immigrant-authors, because they are further removed from the actual experience and can better

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[14] Current Biography (1943), p. 488.

[15] Pietro Di Donato, Christ in Concrete (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1939), p. 77.

consider the immigrant as a factor in American life than as a human being.

Some of the most effective fiction written about those immigrants who came to America was created by authors who had never experienced such a migration and who were not natives of the new world. There were some European literary figures who became interested in this process of resettlement and traced, through their fictional characters, the progress of fellow Europeans in America. Two outstanding representatives can be used to illustrate this group. Vilhelm Moberg was born of peasant stock in Småland, Sweden. He rose from the occupation of farming to that of journalism and fiction. His trilogy (The Emigrants; Unto a Good Land; The Last Letter Home) is perhaps the most valuable fiction about the immigrant from a historical point of view; the introduction is concerned with the European background of his characters, and his treatment is detailed and thorough. His approach is so realistic that it is difficult to believe that he wrote using documents about the Swedish immigrants and not personal memories. The author did visit the United States, but only in 1949 as a successful European artist and not as steerage cargo. His works have been translated by a Swede who did come to America for good in 1930.

The second European author of note is Johan Bojer, the great Norwegian novelist. He too visited

the United States, and his specific purpose was to collect material on the Norwegian-American immigration. His epic novel, The Emigrants, is written from the Norwegian point of view; therefore, it is concerned with the problem of emigration or going away from. This is obvious throughout the story as illustrated by one peasant's reaction to a proposal to migrate.

> The very idea made Morten laugh. No, thanks; he hadn't done anything yet which made it necessary for him to clear out of the country. Go to America? Not if he knew it![16]

Still a third example is Israel Zangwill who was born in England in 1864. His father, a refugee of 1848, was a Russian Jew, and this influenced the future writings of the son. His best-known work is a drama, "The Melting Pot," written with fiery enthusiasm for the improved position of the Jew in America. Zangwill wrote articles and novels deploring Jewish life in New York, and he criticized the restrictive immigration policy adopted by the United States. The European authors concerned with immigration are few, but their contributions are valuable for their fresh perspective.

A fourth group of authors involved in the writing of this literature is made up of Americans who chose to write on this topic because they had been closely associated with the newcomers in some way. The most

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[16]Johan Bojer, The Emigrants (New York: The Century Company, 1925), p. 17.

outstanding example is Willa Cather, a fourth-generation American of Anglo-Irish stock. Although she was born in 1875 in Virginia where immigrants were scarce, her family moved to Nebraska when she was a child, and she grew up among foreign-born and first-generation Americans. As a child she knew pioneering immigrants from Sweden, Bohemia, Russia, and Germany, and many of her novels deal with these European-Americans. As an observer she participated in the immigrant adjustment to the new world, and her books recapture both emotions and events. She had probably witnessed most of the scenes and overheard many of the conversations presented in her narratives. A lesser-known example of the American who wrote intimately of the immigrant is Joseph Antony, author of The Golden Village and Rekindled Fires. His impressions are so vivid that they certainly must have come from an association as close as that of Miss Cather.

The final group of writers is a miscellaneous one; it is made up of those concerned with the newcomer as a literary character or as a factor in a larger theme, such as city politics. Because their uses of the immigrant topic and their motives for this use differ considerably, it is necessary to illustrate this category with a number of examples. Arthur Miller, the well-known American playwright, is an excellent representative of those who wrote of the immigrant as a character and not as an influence on American life. He had lived in Harlem

and had worked in a warehouse; therefore, he had observed those he chose to depict. In "View From the Bridge," Sicilian waterfront workers are presented with violence and passion. The play's climax is a betrayal scene when a jealous settler reports the illegal entrance of his wife's relatives and is killed in the streets. A second example is Frank Norris, a famous American writer who used several immigrants as primary characters in McTeague. He too had lived in the section he described, a semi-slum area of San Francisco, and the novel is marked by its realism. Again the theme is one of passion and violence, and the poorly-adjusted immigrant is important in this treatment. An ignorant Irish dentist is driven by love of money to kill his Swiss-German wife who had become a washerwoman to satisfy his greed. As a secondary theme, a Mexican moron who had invented a fortune in her mind is killed by a miserly Polish Jew who had married her to gain it.

A different approach to the immigrant topic is used by Upton Sinclair, Edwin O'Connor, and others. They wrote of major themes in American social life and used the newcomers as vital factors. Upton Sinclair exposed the terrible conditions in the Chicago stockyards and meat-packing firms of the early twentieth century. In The Jungle he described what he had seen in vivid detail, and his presentation of the Lithuanian workers is slightly melodramatic. One of his major points is

that such horrible conditions would be tolerated only by "green" laborers who were ignorant and desperate. Sinclair offers a solution to these workers, and Jurgis, the principal character, escapes from the "Beef Trust" with its subsistence wage and diseased meat to Socialism. The Last Hurrah by Edwin O'Connor has a different theme, the city boss; this choice is an excellent one to show the influence of the immigrant on developing American politics, for this typical large city is run by a political machine of recent Americans. In a majority of cases, the immigrant held power and not position, as did the ward boss. He gained devotion and obedience from those he helped.

> It was he who found jobs and homes for the recently arrived, who supplied funds in time of distress, who arranged for hospitalization and the payment of medical bills, who gave the son of the family his start in life and the subsequent necessary pushes up the ladder, who built the play grounds for the children of this populous district, and who, in these days when the aged, the helpless, and the indigent had come to depend increasingly upon government beneficence, saw to it that the baffling complexity of preliminary paper work was solved and that funds were ultimately secured.[17]

Thus there exist five major lines of approach for those who write of the foreign-born: the immigrants, second-generation immigrants, concerned Europeans, closely associated Americans, and the miscellaneous set who used the newcomer as a character or an influence.

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[17] Edwin O'Connor, The Last Hurrah (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1956), p. 44.

This literary school is a heterogeneous one, but all in it share an interest in European-Americans. Most of these authors were immigrants or were closely associated with immigrants. Their reasons for writing differ, but all include a concern for the foreign-born.

MOTIVES FOR CREATING IMMIGRANT FICTION

The motives for writing accounts of America's newcomers are numerous and varied, but all fall into three general areas. Many authors have desired to establish the arrival and assimilation of the immigrants as a basic influence in American history; others want to present a particular sect or nationality in a more favorable light; for a third the immigrant is an important factor in dealing with some major problem, such as the exposé of slum conditions in major American cities. The particular desire of each author and the means chosen to implement that desire can thus be seen as a unique approach to one or more of these broad categories.

The indisputable success of the United States as a "melting-pot" for the national stocks of Europe is a remarkable theme in American social history; as a result of this blending, the immigrant is established as a primary influence in American history. Much of the fiction written about the newcomer was created to champion the assimilation process. This conclusion must be restricted, as is the entire paper, to the migrants from Europe; none of those works which were available in English dealt with non-European migrants. A Russian Jew coined a now famous phrase in a melodramatic play when his principal character almost wept that "America

is God's Crucible, the great Melting-Pot where all the races of Europe are melting and re-forming."[18] Almost every novel about the immigrant includes the image of the melting-pot at some point, and attitudes expressed about it illustrate a basic crisis for the foreign-born in the new world. The choice of the immigrant when settling was between an isolated homogeneous colony of fellow countrymen or an established heterogeneous community of Americans. The attitude of the pro-homogeneity group was expressed concisely by a Norwegian author:

> They realized that in their situation they could be of help to each other. After reaching these distant regions where their language separated them from other travelers, their group had become more unified than before: they owned one thing in common--- their language.[19]

A good deal of pressure to maintain voluntary segregation was placed upon the immigrants by their institutions, especially the Church. Their religion bound them to the past, and their priests and ministers sought to hold them faithful to their heritage. In O. E. Rolvaag's Their Fathers' God, the Norwegian minister stands firmly for nationalism, defined as loyalty to the land of one's birth. "If this process of levelling down, of making

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[18]Israel Zangwill, The Melting-Pot (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1917), p. 33.

[19]Vilhelm Moberg, Unto a Good Land (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1954), p. 133.

everybody alike by blotting out all racial traits, is allowed to continue," he warns,

> America is doomed to become the most impoverished land spiritually on the face of the earth; out of our highly praised melting-pot will come. . . a dull, smug complacency, barren of all creative thought and effort. Soon we will have reached the perfect democracy of barrenness. Gone will be the distinguishing traits given us by God.[20]

His argument and others similar to it are convincing; however, the opposing arguments are always more passionate and more persuasive. These rebuttals come from the youthful foreign-born or the first generation, and their supporters more forcibly influenced the still-fluid new world character due to their rapid adjustment, strength and enthusiasm. In the mentioned novel, Peder speaks as an American to answer his spiritual leader. "It would be folly to try to build up the different European nations over here. The foundation is new, the whole structure must be new, and so it shall be!"[21] In many cases this choice between colony and crucible created a barrier between the immigrant parent and child, as seen in the following conversation between a Norwegian mother and son.

> "You will have to find another playmate, Peder!"
> "Why?"
> "Because you are Norwegian and they are Irish! . . . But likely you don't understand that yet, and I couldn't expect you to."

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[20] O. E. Rolvaag, Their Fathers' God (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1931), p. 210.

[21] Ibid.

> "They are <u>people</u> just the same."
> "But they are of another kind. They have another faith. And that is dangerous. . . . You can't mix wheat and potatoes in the same bin."[22]

The melting-pot issue is often complicated by the prejudices of one nationality against another, and it is often ignited by the mixed marriages of the second generation. In numerous incidents supporters of the colony principle voice strong opinions and propose drastic steps: the Sicilians condemned inter-marriage because American women were promiscuous;[23] a village of Hollanders ostracized a young seminary student for chosing an English Baptist over a Dutch Christian;[24] a Norwegian mother threatened her adult son, "If the day should come that you get yourself mixed up with the Irish, then you will have lost your mother---that I could not live through."[25] To people who lived only in the present, a movement away from segregated nationalities was a voluntary sacrifice of one's heritage. Only those who looked to the future could see the benefits of integration, and these became the champions of the melting-pot.

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[22] O. E. Rolvaag, <u>Peder Victorious</u> (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1929), pp. 113-114.

[23] Mangione, <u>loc. cit.</u>

[24] Arnold Mulder, <u>Bram of the Five Corners</u> (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1915).

[25] Rolvaag, <u>Peder Victorious</u>, p. 258.

In spite of the many drawbacks of prejudice, conservatism and misunderstanding, the melting-pot was a success. Migrants from all parts of Europe came together in a new land to live, to cooperate, and to blend. The molding of a new American nationality from diverse nationalities was a major influence in the nation's history, and authors of fiction about the immigrant tried to establish this fact through their various characters and circumstances.

A second great collection of literature which depicts the immigrant has developed owing to the practice of presenting a particular migrant set, a family, sect or nationality, as representative of a larger group; by presenting a small number of characters favorably, the author hopes to improve the image of an entire nationality. Immigrant-authors or first-generation authors generally adopted this approach as a matter of national pride, and their purpose is to influence the attitudes of established Americans held about newcomers of groups thus depicted. One of the first objectives of a writer presenting his special immigrant group in a more favorable light is to dispel or modify existing stereotypes and attitudes. To accomplish this, an author might use several approaches; the most common one is to speak through an immigrant. Thus, through the insight of a minor character, Willa Cather denies the laziness of the Bohemians.

> It must have been a trial for our mothers coming out here and having to

> do everything different. My mother had always lived in town. She says she started behind in farmwork, and never has caught up.[26]

Another device is a description, establishing a word picture that refutes disparaging preconceptions held by settled Americans. The opening paragraph of Rekindled Fires is illustrative of this tactic and presents Stanley, a young Czech, peddling vegetables. "His shoes were unshined and his stockings wrinkled, but his blouse, rolled up at the sleeves and in at the neck, flaunted a conspicuous cleanliness."[27] It describes Stanley as poor but not dirty, and this image contradicts a popular misconception, the immigrant's uncleanliness. Other authors use the development of the entire novel to dispel a stereotype, as did Pietro Di Donato. His sympathetic sketch of himself as a twelve-year old in need of money and a job destroys the impression of foreign children as truants from school. Vilhelm Moberg uses an effective and unusual device in his Scandinavian trilogy to emphasize the unfairness of judging groups by set patterns. Having acquainted the reader with his characters as interesting individuals, he introduces a ship captain and looks at those same immigrants through the captain's eyes. The writer's purpose is achieved, for the reader automatically

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[26]Willa Cather, My Antonia (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1926), p. 239.

[27]Joseph Antony, Rekindled Fires (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1918), p. 3.

rejects the captain's stereotypes.

The author who creates to correct opinions commonly held about the foreign-born must also face the issue of prejudice which is closely linked to preconceived judgments. When prejudice and stereotypes are presented from the viewpoint of the immigrant, they appear both ignorant and cruel; the reader sympathizes with the immigrant who appears in a more favorable light. Most authors acknowledge the existence of prejudice through glimpses into, and speeches from, their characters. Mihal Dobrejak in Out of This Furnace curses this barrier to equality.

> There was a time when I thought I'd surely get a good job sometime. I worked hard. I did what I was told and more. And I've seen them hire Irish, Johnny Bulls, Scotties, just off the boat and knowing no more about a steel mill than Mikie there, and in a year they're giving me orders. . . . I know my job, Marcha. I could take over that furnace tomorrow. . . . But I'm a Hunky and they don't give good jobs to Hunkies. God damn their souls to hell.[28]

Others of the foreign-born are not so bitter, and through a presentation of their thoughts, the reader obtains insight and explanations. Elias Tobenkin has created such a character in Witte (Witte Arrives) who sees beyond life's surface and enables the reader to also.

> He was not ashamed of these surroundings. He was not in the least annoyed by them. Behind the peddler's cart, he knew, there was often a man with ideals and a high

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[28] Thomas Bell, Out of This Furnace (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1941), pp. 184-185.

> education. Many of his countrymen took to the peddler's cart, to the junk wagon, because it was the only thing they could turn to. They were in a strange land of whose language and customs they were ignorant.[29]

An author might speak as an omniscient narrator to express this prejudice.

> In the old country the Slovaks had been an oppressed minority from the beginning of time, a simple, religious, unwarlike people, a nation of peasants and shepherds whom the centuries had taught patience and humility. In America they were all this and more, foreigners in a strange land, ignorant of its languages and customs, fearful of authority in whatever guise. Arrived in America they were thrust---peasants and shepherds that they were---into the blast furnaces and rolling mills, and many of them paid with their lives for their unfamiliarity with machinery and the English language. Even more bewildering were the hostility and contempt of their neighbors, the men they worked with. That hostility, that contempt, epitomized in the epithet "Hunky," was the most profound and lasting influence on their personal lives.[30]

In many cases, a single sentence establishes a recognition or acceptance of prejudice on behalf of the immigrants: Stephen Romer, a Hungarian, discovers that dancing is for all, even "Hunkies";[31] Geremio, an Italian, is called a "wopbastard" by his boss and submits as a machinelike entity

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[29] Elias Tobenkin, Witte Arrives (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1916), p. 76.

[30] Bell, loc. cit., pp. 122-123.

[31] Joseph Antony, The Golden Village (Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill Company, 1924).

to keep his job;[32] a New England town meeting is held to drive out a family of "immoral Polacks" which had committed no crime;[33] the young boys in Mount Allegro were not allowed to own Boy Scout knives because of Sicilians' reputation as gangsters.[34] By all of these illustrations, prejudice against a foreign-born group is demonstrated.

The most ironic connection between the newcomers and prejudice is the ill feeling of one immigrant group against others. The desire to maintain segregated colonies and the disapproval of mixed marriages both illustrate this inter-prejudice; it is further demonstrated by the descriptions and explanations of the narrator or by the conversations of characters. "It's all right in America to become American and to marry an American gentleman," says a Jewish boy to his sister. "But an Irish Catholic, the son of an immigrant, of a ward heeler---I don't see the sense of that."[35]

Many national stocks and religious sects have literary champions, and these authors help to improve the standing of immigrants in America. The literature concerning one

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[32]Di Donato, loc. cit.

[33]Edith Miniter, Our Natupski Neighbors (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1916).

[34]Mangione, loc. cit.

[35]Ludwig Lewisohn, Island Within (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1928), p. 151.

group deserves special mention. Tales about the Jews are abundant and comprise a distinct body of literature; the writers are generally Jewish themselves and are annoyingly sympathetic. Ludwig Lewisohn, a known Zionist, has explained his choice of a literary subject in the following manner:

> The migrations of modern times, whether caused by intolerance or the lack of land and bread, have given rise to problems and to conflicts which were unknown in the earlier periods of an emptier world. And these problems and conflicts, tragic enough to the millions that have to face them, have commonly been regarded with stupid indifference or contempt by those few master-peoples into whose hands historic luck has played the greater part of the earth's surface. The Jews are not the only migratory folk of modern times, but they furnish the classical example of migration, because nowhere have they yet found the rest of either tolerance or land.[36]

The Jewish authors considered in this study are not noted for their objectivity, and they are quick to cry out against any mistreatment. Protest devices are numerous, but again the most successful approach is to speak through a character.

> When a little child in Russia, he had learned to fear certain Christian holidays because they meant drunkenness, and that meant breaking into Jewish homes, fighting, brawling---"a calamity upon Jews." In America the prejudice against his race did not manifest itself in physical violence. But there were fine pin-pricks, subtle discriminations, which did not escape

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[36] Ibid., p. 41.

> his eye, which did not escape his own person at times.[37]

When reading accounts of the Jews, one must remember both their characteristic appeal for sympathy and their tragic history.

A final motive for writing this type of fiction is to use the immigrant as a factor in a broader theme; the most obvious use of the newcomer as an influence is that adopted by Edwin O'Connor. In The Last Hurrah he connects the foreign-born with the development of American politics. There are different lines of approach to this topic, the immigrant and politics. One not generally stressed is the effect that Socialism had on many who migrated in the mid-nineteenth century. This movement was linked primarily to those who came from Russia and Germany to escape the old order and to accomplish a social revolution in the New World. Gottfried in The House of Conrad was a devout German socialist, but his life in America brought only political failure and disillusionment. His final refuge was a ranch in the West.[38] Emile in Witte Arrives also turns to the political theory of Socialism. As a feature writer for a major newspaper, he storms against caste and class lines in a democracy.

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[37] Tobenkin, Witte, p. 298.

[38] Elias Tobenkin, The House of Conrad (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1918).

His influence was felt by many in New York, but his political activity was confined to writing.[39] The immigrant socialist, so prominent in the novels before 1918, simply could not succeed in activating his theory in a new, expanding country.

Local politics was greatly influenced by the establishment of leagues of the foreign-born, for immigrants soon learned strength comes through unity. It was quite likely that the Sons of Bohemia or the Irish Brotherhood might decide such vital questions as building new schools or paying increased taxes. Furthermore, the newcomers rapidly learned to work through the industrial unions as a means of acquiring strength. Immigrant group voting was always a factor to be considered by political strategists.

The most familiar association of the immigrant and politics is the use of the newcomers as fuel for city political machines. A local boss would extend favors to the "greenhorns" knowing well that their gratitude would be shown on election days. For the foreign-born, unacquainted with political activity and cultivated by the machines, politics equalled the ward heelers with smiles and cigars. "There was no such thing as political life in the Russia of that period," explains one author.

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[39]Tobenkin, Witte.

> The only political parties in existence there were the secret organizations of revolutionists, of people for whom government detectives were incessantly searching so that they might be hanged or sent to Siberia. As a consequence a great many of our immigrants landed in America absolutely ignorant of the meaning of citizenship and the first practical instructors on the subject into whose hands they fell were men like Cuff-Button Leary or his political underlings. These taught them that a vote was something to be sold for two or three dollars, with the prospect of future favors into the bargain, and that a politician was a specialist in doing people favors. Favors, favors, favors! I heard the word so often, in connection with politics, that the two words became inseparable in my mind. A politician was a "master of favors," as my native tongue would have it.[40]

Other major themes that feature the immigrant as a primary factor are the exposé of tenement conditions, Upton Sinclair's well-known attack on the "Beef Trust,"[41] and a presentation of the horrible conditions of migrant laborers.

Regardless of their motives, all who write fiction depicting the immigrant are concerned about his position in a new world and his adjustment to a new life.

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[40] Abraham Cahan, The Rise of David Levinsky (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1917), p. 133.

[41] Upton Sinclair, The Jungle (New York: The Viking Press, 1946).

LITERARY TECHNIQUES IN IMMIGRANT FICTION

Fiction about the participants in the European-American transplantation is the product of many authors writing for many purposes; therefore, artistic styles and techniques to be considered in an evaluation of this literature are diverse. To present each writer's style, his literary plan and devices, would be tedious; furthermore, such an approach would be irrelevant in this discussion of the immigrant as a theme in fiction. However, it is both important and pertinent that similarities, likenesses observed throughout a majority of the works considered, be presented. There are two major ones.

The great number of those who write about European-Americans use a sympathetic approach. They write so as to present the immigrants in a more favorable light, emphasizing the injustices done them in the old and new worlds and the more laudable traits of their characters. A few authors do write on this topic to amuse a reading audience, but at the same time, they also write to create appealing immigrant characters. Edith Miniter and Jerre Mangione are examples of this smaller group, and though you laugh at the characters they create, you also are drawn to them. Fiction which attacks or ridicules America's foreign-born might certainly exist, but, if so,

it is not easily obtained for reading and was not available for this paper. A tone of compassion is prevalent among those who write of the immigrant, and this is their most obvious and most important similarity.

The point of focus is a second likeness. All of the novels considered deal with those immigrants who came to America as the poor, the tired, and the homeless; novels about adventurers or prosperous newcomers, about those who traveled and settled in comfort, either do not exist or are not accessible. The characters of this immigrant fiction are the "greenhorns," those migrants to whom the American language and customs were alien; for them adjustment was difficult. Immigrants who were rapidly and easily assimilated have been ignored by a majority, if not all, of the writers concerned with the influence of the foreign-born in the United States.

A literary device which was encountered once is especially effective. It is used in Di Donato's Christ in Concrete, the story of immigrant construction workers. This is a stream of consciousness novel and is written in dialect; therefore, the narrative is presented from the newcomer's point of view and is read as the spoken language of Italian-Americans. This technique, which enables the reader to see the new world through Italian eyes, is useful for its different perspective to a student of the foreign-born.

> Job loomed up damp, shivery grey. Its giant members waiting. . . . The Lean as he fought his burden on looked forward to only one goal, the end. The barrow he pushed, he did not love. The stones that brutalized his palms he did not love. The great God Job he did not love.[42]

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[42]Di Donato, loc. cit., pp. 17-18.

RECURRENT THEMES IN IMMIGRANT FICTION

The immigrant is presented by a variety of authors in a variety of ways, but there are certain themes which recur throughout this body of fiction. The general minimization or emphasis of a certain phase of migrant life qualifies as such a common topic. There is a similarity of theme as there is of tone and focus. One example of the minimized and often excluded motif is that of motivation. The reasons for resettlement are seldom stressed. Generally, authors of fiction about the transfer deal with motives briefly if at all; most shut these away with the old world and that earlier life. In a majority of the works a sentence establishes one of a variety of motives as appropriate for each migrant group. It is usually a form of escape from the old order: unfair taxes, military service, anti-semitism, an outdated political order, land-hunger or poverty. A few authors, three of the twenty-eight considered, do develop this topic in more detail, and each uses a different approach.

Vilhelm Moberg, through an omniscient narrator gives a reason for leaving Sweden by commenting that "the new land had soil without tillers and called for tillers without soil."

> It opened invitingly for those who longed for a freedom denied them at home. The urge to emigrate stirred in the landless, in the debtbound, the suppressed and the discontented. Others again saw no mirage of special privilege or wealth in the new land, but wanted to escape entanglements and dilemmas in the old country. They emigrated, not to something but from something. Many, and widely different, were the answers to the question: Why?[43]

In Rekindled Fires the motive for migration is enclosed in a fiery address made to a Sons of Bohemia league by one of its members and concerning the outbreak of World War I in Europe.

> Most of us present tonight, ve are here to se-cure der liberty dot we could not get in de old country. Here ve are masters, ve are bosses, ve are kings! . . . In Bohemia de Chermans got us und dey choked us und den dey couldn't squeeze us hard enough mit noblemen und taxes, dey tried it mit priests. Ve fought deir nobles und ve laughed at deir priests. For dis mine grandfadder died mit a gun in his hands; for dis I will knock de block off from efery Cherman dot tells me I shall respect "mine king," und efery priest dot asks for mine hard earned dollars to mumble for me his hocus-pocus.[44]

A third author, Thomas Bell, is more direct. He simply states a motive for migrating as part of his opening character sketch.

> George Kracha came to America in the fall of 1881, by way of Budapest and Breman. He left behind him in a Hungarian village a young wife, a sister and a widowed mother;

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[43]Moberg, Emigrants, p. x.

[44]Antony, Rekindled Fires, pp. 31-32.

> it may be that he hoped he was likewise leaving behind the endless poverty and oppression which were the birthrights of a Slovak peasant in Franz Josef's empire. He was bound for the hard-coal country of northeast Pennsylvania.[45]

It is surprising that the initial step, the motive for the great decision to migrate, is so often excluded from the narrative. Since this is the usual treatment in immigrant fiction, the omission must be part of a deliberate attempt to bury the past in relating the present.

A theme that appears quite frequently in novels on this subject is the measure of satisfaction felt by those who voluntarily left Europe to come to America. Many authors create circumstances to give their characters an opportunity to weigh the merit of that decision. For some the migration and resettlement were not only unrewarding but also unbearable. These foreign-born Americans had only one goal; "there was always hope, the hope of saving enough money to go back in triumph to the old country, of buying a farm back in the hills, of going into business for one's self."[46] From this dissatisfied group came loving talk of former homes: "Everyone was much happier there. My Aunt Giovanna claimed it was because God lived closer to Sicily than

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[45] Bell, loc. cit., p. 3.

[46] Ibid., p. 48.

he did to America."[47] They also fashioned new and disparaging descriptions of their adopted country: "Discovered by an Italian---named from Italian---But oh, that I may leave this land of disillusion."[48] One unfortunate result of this discontent with the new land was that unrealistic images were fashioned about the old lands; a corollary of dissatisfaction with the new was desire for the old.

> It was the same with her native land. She had lost it in a well so deep that she could never retrieve it. The land was there, and she knew where it was; she had stood staring after it in the daytime, she had stretched her arms for it in her dreams at night. But she would never reach it, never get it back, never again see her beloved ones at home. . . . She made a special Sweden out of her longing, a Sweden that she carried within herself. . . . She wove a land that no one had ever seen and no one ever would see.[49]

Women, especially, were driven by homesickness and discontent to regret their transplantation.

Only those authors who write of the Jewish settlers are freed from an evaluation of satisfaction; all of them speak favorably of the country adopted by this nationality. Elias Tobenkin speaks for all this migrant group when he acknowledges their debt "owed this

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[47] Mangione, loc. cit., p. 19.

[48] Di Donato, loc. cit., p. 279.

[49] Vilhelm Moberg, The Last Letter Home (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1961), p. 251.

new world that had been so kind to them, had offered them a haven from persecution, had opened its bountiful stores to them without discrimination, to them---oppressed, driven Jews."[50]

Closely associated with this evaluation of the wisdom shown by migration is the theme which expresses immigrant criticism of the adopted land. In some instances these censures are expressions of dissatisfaction, but in a majority of cases they represent a lack of understanding about American culture and mores. For example, one Polish newcomer had a very unfavorable view of the New England natives, for he felt that "Americans understood nothing of the way to live."

> They turned up their very remarkable noses at the broken bread which Kani continued to have shipped weekly from the city. Yet it cost much less than any other food, and with coffee made from chicory one grew it formed a satisfying meal. . . . He had not ceased to wonder over Americans, who were determined to eat whether or not they prospered.[51]

Seeing America through the eyes of a European peasant, its habits make little sense; the immigrant criticized what he did not understand. Frequently, immigrant characters speak out against American morals which are complex and lenient. Having been bound by well defined, simple and strict rules which had been used for generations

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[50]Tobenkin, Witte, p. 27.

[51]Miniter, loc. cit., pp. 143-144.

and were accepted by all, they were bewildered by American ways. Spiritual barrenness was another immigrant charge against this country. The religious atmosphere which had dominated much of the old world was absent or diluted in the new. Many newcomers criticized America as a "land where money was put above respect and family honor."[52] Here there was a constant struggle for "gold and more gold. It was the cardinal sin of American life. Money madness was the curse of the age, the blot on our civilization."[53] The complaint that revealed the most bitterness was that concerning American narrowness and clannishness. "The New World was so intolerant of the newcomer. It was forever trying to remodel him, to pattern him after its own fashion, after its own likes and whims."[54] Both of these themes, gratification and criticism, appear frequently in this fiction; both help to measure the adjustment of immigrants to the United States.

The theme that occurs most often in accounts of immigrants and that has been referred to previously in discussing both mixed marriages and isolated colonies is the gradual separation of the second-generation newcomers from the first. Young transfers and first-generation

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[52]Mangione, loc. cit., p. 165.

[53]Tobenkin, Witte, p. 281.

[54]Tobenkin, House of Conrad, p. 21.

Americans could adapt to a new world and a new language much more easily and more rapidly than did their parents, for adult immigrants usually retained their old customs and language because there was no time to learn the new. As a result, an ever-increasing gulf divided the two.

> My mother's insistence that we speak only Italian at home drew a sharp line between our existence there and our life in the world outside. We gradually acquired the notion that we were Italians at home and American (whatever that was) elsewhere. Instinctively, we all sensed the necessity of adapting ourselves to two different worlds.[55]

By providing instruction in the English language, the American public schools which associated the foreign-born with the native played a major role in this assimilation process. A majority of the European-Americans wanted their children to benefit educationally from the migration, but none of them wanted these children to forsake all traditions. "Don't speak American to me," snapped one mother. "I don't want to hear anything but Italian in this house. You will never learn it anywhere else. I don't want my children to grow up into babbi who can't speak the language of their parents."[56] When a barrier resulting from speech or from Americanization of many types caused friction in the home, children often escaped

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[55] Mangione, loc. cit., p. 52.

[56] Ibid., pp. 21-22.

to a world they saw as free from tradition and national isolation.

There are other major themes recurring in this body of literature which depicts the immigrant, but these three are most prevalent. Furthermore, they are the most valuable for historical purposes, because they are directly concerned with the process of resettlement and assimilation.

Important minor themes are used with the preceding topics and independently. The influence of the Immigrant Church is an example. For some newcomers religion is a dominant force, and Beret in Giants in the Earth is almost driven to insanity, because she feels that God is displeased with her family's resettlement on the Great Plains.[57] For others the Church is justice and strength, a guide to follow. In Bram of Five Corners when a young student who had been admired by all for his intellect is placed under sanction by the Christian Reformed Church, he is ostracized by the entire community as proof of the Church's leadership.[58] For many the Church is a hindrance in a new world, part of the past to reject. As Americans they were no longer to be bound by king or pope.

Sex is another secondary theme, for it was a great

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[57]Rolvaag, Giants in the Earth.

[58]Mulder, Bram of Five Corners.

force in the lives of the immigrants. For many who were poor and isolated it was their only pleasure, and it is justly given much attention in this immigrant literature.

Recurring primary and secondary themes are evidence that fiction about the immigrant does exist as a distinct body of literature.

CONCLUSION

The great body of fiction which has been created around the character of the immigrant does compose a distinct literary school. As such, it has important characteristics. A majority of the artists who chose to present these voluntary Americans were themselves immigrants or the children of immigrants. As a result, the tone generally used in these novels is one of compassion. The newcomers used as literary subjects are usually from the European states; those from Asia or Africa have not been depicted as settlers frequently, if at all.

The most outstanding feature of the novels, individually and collectively, is that the characters used are "the poor, the tired, and the homeless." Only these unfortunates and the "greenhorns" who were slow to adjust seem to be appropriate as literary objects. Others who came to America for adventure, to make money, or simply as a comfortable transplantation have not been featured in such works.

From a historical point of view this fiction is important, for it depicts a major theme in America's social development. The influence of the melting-pot

and the effects of the assimilation and contributions of the immigrant are significant in American History.

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