

**Representations of Masculinity in Wilbur Smith's Courtney Saga.  
Contextual Causes and Strategies of Authorial Control**



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Contextual Causes and Strategies of Authorial Control**

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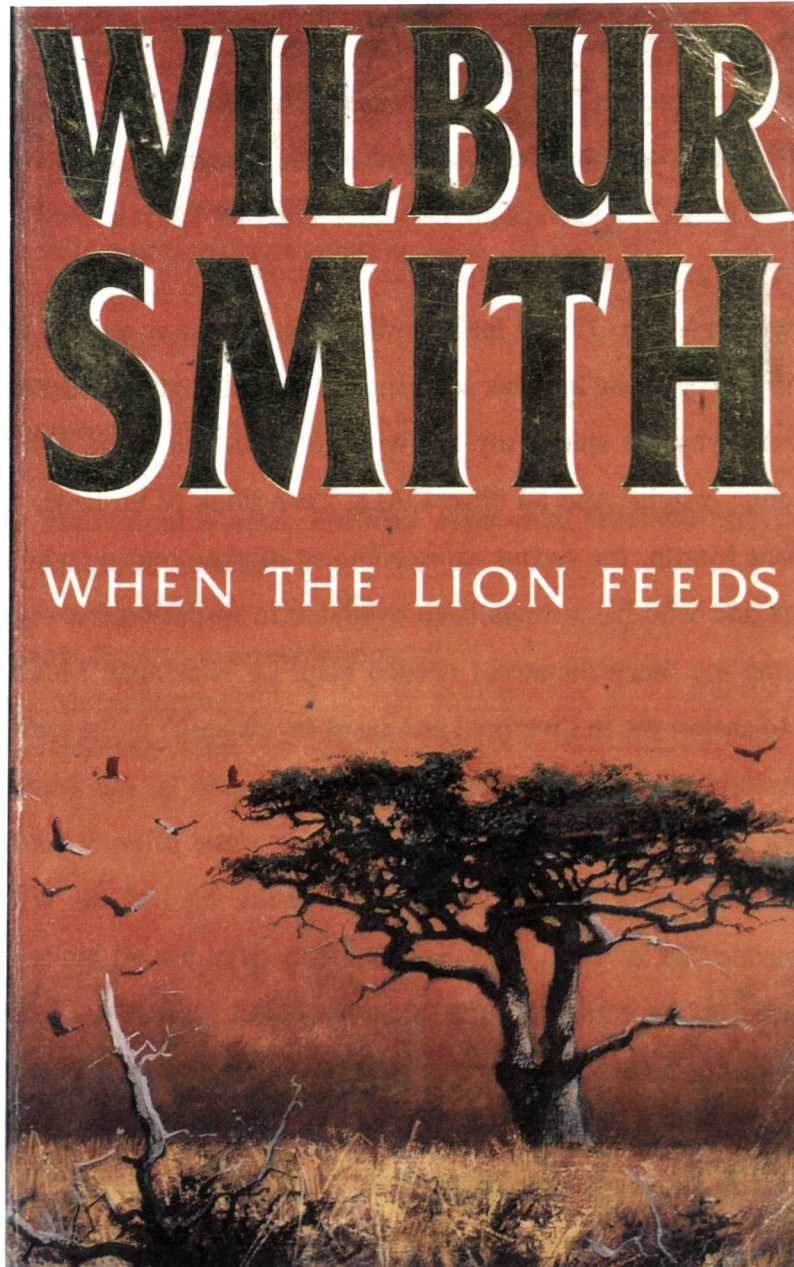


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## Introduction

The preface brings the writer face to face with the reader. It comes at the beginning as a way of introducing the work but is often the last thing written. Thinking about the preface takes you back to the beginning, to the early inspirations that inform the writing. Often there is a question that is rarely far from consciousness but cannot readily be put into words. It takes the process of writing sometimes to discover the questions that have been disturbing you. (Victor Seidler, *Man Enough*)

Nowhere was the polarisation of gender more pronounced than in adventure fiction, with its lively, overtly masculine heroes such as Frank Fearless and Dick Dare, and its general absence of heroines, girls' stories and women writers. (Richard Phillips, *Mapping Men and Empire*)

I present my book specially to boys, in the earnest hope that they may derive valuable information, much pleasure, great profit, and unbound amusement from its pages.

One word more. If there is any boy or man who loves the melancholy and morose, and who cannot enter with kindly sympathy into the regions of fun, let me seriously advise him to shut my book and put it away. It is not meant for him. (R.M. Ballantyne, *The Coral Island*)

“With no greater events than these,” writes Jane Austen in *Pride and Prejudice*, “sometimes dirty and sometimes cold, did January and February pass away.”<sup>1</sup> Had she been writing the preface for her dissertation and not about the time that elapsed before Elizabeth could join her friend Charlotte in Hunsford, Jane Austen would have been forced to add: and windy and rainy March, April and May, not to mention hot, steamy and dull June, July and August, and so on and so forth until she would have accounted for all meteorological conditions characterising the months, or rather years, spent until the final product had been completed. Far be it from me to create expectations of literary (not to say intellectual) quality for what follows. Unfortunately, I am no Jane Austen and I lack her gifted pen-skills. Anyway, sometimes dirty and sometimes cold, three years have elapsed since I started studying

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<sup>1</sup> Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (London: Penguin Classics, 1972) 187.

## 2 *Representations of Masculinity ...*

Wilbur Smith's works and the product of my investigation into his Courtney saga are the pages that follow and which I proceed to introduce.

What drew me to write about Wilbur Smith's narratives was the lure of the popular and the excitement of adventure. Ever since I was little, even the mention of the word 'adventure' did something to me. The promise of adventure in a novel, story, television series or film was, and has remained but for different reasons, a 'bait' that made me drop everything else in order to escape to unknown and unexplored regions of the world in the company of hearty heroes capable of awesome deeds of derring-do. In the province of adventure, wrongs are righted, obstacles are overcome, dangers are met with strength and determination, injustices are redressed, and heroes are unfailingly strong, powerful, courageous and good. If I began to read and watch adventure as a kid, therefore, it was because it created a world simple and uncomplicated that offered me an alternative to the messy reality of the here and now (I should say of the there and then), enabling me to escape from a dull childhood existence of long hours of far from simple and uncomplicated boredom.

Adventure, furthermore, meant 'fun' reading as opposed to 'serious' reading. My school-reading experience almost killed my desire to read at all. At age eleven, I found myself with the prospect of having to write school essays about Camilo José Cela's *Viaje al Pirineo de Lérida* - the teacher condescendingly decided this book was more appropriate for us than the *Viaje a la Alcarria* she had at first wanted to inflict on us; Mercè Rodoreda's *La meva Cristina i altres contes*, which contains, among others, a story about a man and his relationship with a hen after his wife died, the implications of which escaped our still-innocent minds and which leads me to conclude those were just the early days of concerned parental supervision; and the first volume of Miguel de Cervantes' *El ingenioso hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha*, whose many interests I did not fully grasp till much, much later in my life. Confronted with those cultivated texts as opposed to the stories I perused at home for fun, I learnt to draw a distinction between pleasurable reading and compulsory reading - which I regarded more as a bleak obligation than as an enlightening window into the world of knowledge. Meanwhile, my incursions into worlds populated by heroes such as Enid

Blyton's Famous Five, their tougher, less ginger-bread-and-strawberry-jam-like American counterparts Jupiter Jones, Peter Crenshaw and Bob Andrews, and the even tougher, grown-up heroes created by Jules Verne and H. Rider Haggard, allowed me to experience an excitement and a pleasure that I thought no other texts could provide.

Very early in my life, therefore, I drew a line between 'serious' and 'enlightening' narratives as opposed to 'entertainment' narratives, a line that has never completely disappeared and still determines the way I read and what I read. I have, indeed, learnt to appreciate and enjoy the 'classics', but when I have time to spare it is novels by Patricia Cornwell, Stephen King, Kathy Reichs, Ian Rankin, P.D. James, Ruth Rendell or Tom Holland that I get hold of in order to indulge my day-dreaming fancies. This is not to imply that I regard popular narratives as subsidiary, secondary reading that have no literary quality whatsoever and, therefore, deserve no critical attention. After years of reading 'in compartments', that is the classics as 'compulsory' and popular narratives 'for fun', I have learnt to appreciate the fact that what critics regard as 'serious' literature can also be high entertainment and that popular narratives are not only enlightening, but reach high levels of literary sophistication. However, I believe that 'serious' and popular fiction are two *different* sides of the same coin. Together, they reflect and explicate the society we live in and they partake of and assimilate the broad social, political and cultural trends, interests and concerns of the times and contexts in which they are written. Yet, they remain different entities that work on different artistic parameters, are marketed and consumed differently and have different traditions, which does not mean they have different degrees of aesthetic or moral value or that they do not deserve serious analytical consideration or respect.

These two broad compartments of literary production, that is 'serious' and 'popular' fiction, however, have not been granted the same status in academia. Although things have changed substantially in the last two decades, the 'spokesmen' of cultivated taste have traditionally approached, and some still do, the popular in condemnatory tones that Arthur Asa Berger summarises as follows with reference to culture in general:

#### 4 Representations of Masculinity ...

Popular culture, in contrast to 'elite' culture, was considered to be junk that had no aesthetic value but, in the form of comic pages in newspapers, entertained us and was also useful for wrapping garbage. Not only was popular culture seen as the opposite of 'elite' culture (or unpopular culture), popular culture was also seen as a threat to elite culture, and critics of popular culture frequently cited Gresham's law, to the effect that the bad *must* drive out the good.<sup>2</sup>

This perception, although increasingly infrequent, is kept alive by scholars who take it as their moral duty to diagnose the ills of a society that has succumbed to the lure of global mass consumption. Jean-François Lyotard, for instance, wrote about culture in present-day society:

Eclecticism is the degree zero of contemporary general culture: one listens to reggae, watches a western, eats McDonald's food for lunch and local cuisine for dinner, wears Paris perfume in Tokyo and 'retro' clothes in Hong Kong. It is easy to find a public for eclectic works. By becoming kitsch, art panders to the confusion which reigns in the 'taste' of patrons. Artists, gallery owners, critics, and the public wallow together in the 'anything goes', and the epoch is one of slackening.<sup>3</sup>

Popular narratives, as exponents of popular culture, have suffered the same fate and have been consistently denied the status of art. Scholars and critics have tended to erect barriers between 'high' and 'low' fiction, granting works such as *Hamlet*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Waiting for Godot* and *The Lord of the Flies* the status of classics worthy of scholarly attention, but denying works such as *The Coral Island*, *She* or *Treasure Island* any literary quality apart from their 'obvious' entertainment potential through the relentless manipulation of basic human emotions such as fear, excitement, risk, suspense and lust. By so doing, they have not only disregarded the fact that most of the texts that we nowadays regard as classics enjoyed great popular appeal in their own time (a friend of mine insists Shakespeare was the Steven Spielberg of the seventeenth century), moving readers in the same way as adventure, and other popular genres, are supposed to do at present. They have also set

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<sup>2</sup> Arthur Asa Berger, "Postmodern / Postmuseum? Popular Culture and Museums in Contemporary Society," *The Postmodern Presence. Readings in Postmodernism in American Culture and Society*, ed. Arthur Asa Berger (Walnut Creek, California, London and New Delhi: Altamira Press, 1998) 89.

<sup>3</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition. A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991) 76.

the limits for what is to be regarded as transcendent or respectful reading, depriving students of the pleasure of an unprejudiced approach to literature.

Taking all these aspects into consideration, therefore, when my PhD course advisor, later to become my thesis supervisor, suggested Wilbur Smith to me as a possible subject for study, my pulse began to rush in anticipation. I had never read a novel by Wilbur Smith at that point, but I was aware of the popularity the author enjoyed as one of the ‘masters’ of thoroughgoing adventure. Writing a thesis, we all know, is a long and painful process, so I thought that as I had to undertake an intellectual journey into the unknown anyway, it would be better if it was one into the world of adventure. This investigation, I assumed, would not only enable me to recover part of my childhood, to experience once again the pleasure and excitement that adventure tales had provided me with in the past; it would also give me the opportunity to devote my efforts to the serious study of a genre that, as one of the examples of popular writing, has traditionally been labelled as the opposite of fine art and, in Martin Green’s words, “has therefore largely been disparaged, referred to [...] in such terms as ‘blood and thunder’, ‘penny dreadfuls’ or ‘dime novels’.”<sup>4</sup> Consequently, it is with ‘uncontained glee’ that I travelled to London with the intention of raiding book-shop shelves for all the Wilbur Smith novels I could find.

The first shock came when I was actually faced with row upon row of lustrous and colourful Wilbur Smith novels in Dillons Bookshop in Gower Street, London. The good news was that I would not have to devote time to locating the author’s oeuvre; it was all there. The bad news was that the volumes were, indeed, fat and that there were many of them, which meant that I would have to do a lot of reading and selecting before actually starting writing. The second shock came when I actually started reading one of the copies I had just purchased, which happened to be *The Dark of the Sun* (Smith’s second novel, written in 1965), whose back cover promises it to be “[a] powerful, savage story which packs murder and love, rape and rescue, treachery and loyalty into a gripping fast-moving novel” and that “[i]n places it is horrific; always it

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<sup>4</sup> Martin Green, *Seven Types of Adventure Tale. An Ethiology of a Major Genre* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991) 27.

is exciting, strong and clear,” not to mention the fact that it is “[b]loodthirsty, bloodstained excitement of white mercenaries in the Congo ... it’s impossible to put down.” *The Dark of the Sun* is truly all this, and then some.

The very first pages of the novel should have prepared me for what was to follow. The novel opens with these words:

‘I don’t like the idea,’ announced Wally Hendry, and belched. He moved his tongue round his mouth getting the taste of it before he went on. ‘I think the whole idea stinks like a ten-day corpse.’ He lay sprawled on one of the beds with a glass balanced on his naked chest and he was sweating heavily in the Congo heat. (*Dark 5*)<sup>5</sup>

‘Now, this is a man,’ I remember thinking. ‘And *this* is another *man*,’ I continued as I moved my eyes over the paragraph that introduces the actual hero of the story, as he proceeds to shave, in the following terms:

Bruce spoke without interest and looked at himself in the fly-spotted mirror above the wash-basin. The face that looked back was sun-darkened with a cap of close-cropped black hair; soft hair that would be unruly and inclined to curl if it were longer. Black eyebrows slanting upwards at the corners, green eyes with a heavy fringe of lashes and a mouth which could smile as readily as it could sulk. Bruce regarded his good looks without pleasure. It was a long time since his mouth had either smiled or sulked. He did not feel the old tolerant affection for his nose, the large slightly hooked nose that rescued his face from prettiness and gave him the air of a genteel pirate. (*Dark 5*)

Still not familiar with Smith’s style and idiosyncrasies - I did not know that all Smith’s heroes have big, hooked noses to go with and hint at their big penises - I thought, ‘My, my. Lee Marvin,’ (who has a very nice nose). I had not yet turned the novel’s first page and a man had already belched and another had scrutinised his sun-burnt, weathered, handsome face in a mirror and displayed his tough, imperturbable inner self. Still on that first page, I found that the heroes had just had “a gutsful of [a] nigger army” and that they were in charge of “a bunch of bloody refugees.” (*Dark 5*) In short, a fine exhibition of tough machos and of racism had welcomed me into the world of Wilbur Smith. But more was lying in wait for me to go with the murder, love, rescue,

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<sup>5</sup> All subsequent direct references from Wilbur Smith’s novels are quoted in this way. I use a key word from the title and page number within brackets. Full reference can be found in the bibliography.



treachery and loyalty promised on the book's back cover. As the hero finds himself in love with the heroine, Shermaine, he begins to consider the idea of marriage, but his mind "[shies] away from that word with startling violence." Yet, he begins to examine the possibility, "[s]talking it as though it were a dangerous beast, ready to take flight again as soon as it showed its teeth." (*Dark* 175) So, here we are, I thought, another fine portrayal of 'woman the entrapper' and marriage 'the monstrous domesticator'. Just in case the idea is not clear enough, the author proceeds:

For some people [marriage] is a good thing. It can stiffen the spineless; ease the lonely; give direction to the wanderers; spur those without ambition - and, of course, there was the final unassailable argument in its favour. Children.

But there are some who can only sicken and shrivel in the colourless cell of matrimony. With no space to fly, your wings must weaken with disuse; turned inwards, your eyes become short-sighted; when all your communication with the rest of the world is through the glass windows of the cell, then your contact is limited. (*Dark* 175)

Not that I was offended. Popular fiction in general has never been much concerned about notions of taste and Political Correctness, at least not till the present. Furthermore, I had expected to encounter imperialist, patriarchal and racist messages encoded in Smith's adventure tales. Adventure, in fact, has become one of the truest exposés of the darkest sides of the white man's mind. With their racist excesses, megalomaniac endeavours, confirmation of traditional sexual roles, misogynist remarks and masculinist practices, adventure narratives reflect the 'gothic undersides', the twisting corridors, trapdoors and subterranean passages underlying the white man's self-congratulatory colonial project. The ideological slant of Smith's *The Dark of the Sun*, therefore, was not what concerned me, at least not at that stage. The book, whatever its infelicitous comments, is a real page-turner anyway, which in the realm of the popular is always an invaluable asset.

What worried me instead was the feeling of exclusion I experienced. Adventure narratives have always been 'boys' stuff'; as Joseph Kestner phrases the idea, they belong in a "continuum of heroising masculinity."<sup>6</sup> In adventure fiction - with its lively, overtly masculine heroes and its general absence of heroines, girls'

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<sup>6</sup> Joseph Kestner, *Masculinities in Victorian Painting* (Vermont and Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1995) 28.

stories and women writers - the polarisation of gender is pronounced. And Smith's fiction is certainly no exception. Women feature prominently in the novels, but they are just masculinist imaginings of pliant, available and sexually appetising femininity contained within and fashioned according to formidable patriarchal parameters. No wonder *The Dark of the Sun* has been qualified as follows, "If the phrase 'a man's book' has any meaning, it describes this powerful savage story."<sup>7</sup> Years of academic study of literature have certainly expanded my horizons and have provided me with long hours of intellectual challenge and pursuit, but I have lost my, so to speak, literary innocence on the way. Consequently, when reading *The Dark of the Sun*, I could not lose myself in the world of adventure, action and excitement as I used to do when I was a kid. I could neither forget nor forgive the fact that the book was not addressed to me in any way. In fact, I felt marginalised from a text that excluded me and legitimated the 'natural' authority of white men and underpinned the hegemony of the white male elite.

This feeling of exclusion, however, did not make me abandon the idea of dealing with Wilbur Smith's fiction for the purpose of writing my PhD dissertation. In fact, it provided me with my thesis' point of departure: the reasons that can account for my feeling of exclusion from a world that had, in the past, enabled me to escape from the daily routine into the province of adventure. With that idea in mind, I proceeded to read Smith's adventure novels. Eventually I decided to narrow the number of novels under analysis to the Courtney saga, which comprises ten volumes so far, the latest of which, *Birds of Prey* (1997) and *Monsoon* (1999), trace the origins of the Courtneys in England in the late seventeenth century and explain how they arrived in Africa. The other eight novels, written earlier, narrate the Courtneys' lives in Africa and South Africa from the late nineteenth century to the 1980s. These are: *When the Lion Feeds* (1964), *The Sound of Thunder* (1966), *The Burning Shore* (1976), *A Sparrow Falls* (1977), *Power of the Sword* (1986), *Rage* (1987), *A Time to Die* (1989) and *Golden Fox* (1990).

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<sup>7</sup> Comment from *Book & Bookmen* quoted in *Monsoon*. See final, unnumbered pages of the novel where a list of other Wilbur Smith's novels is contained together with critical comments from various magazines and newspapers.

The reasons why I have only focused on these novels (Smith has written twenty-seven to date) are the following. To start with, and very simply, they are the novels I liked the most, although I also enjoyed *The Sunbird* (1972) and *The Seventh Scroll* (1995). Yet, it is not only personal taste I have taken into account. The second reason that made me focus on these novels is the fact that they follow the development of the Courtney family over the centuries. The notion of family unit and familial loyalty is very prominent in Smith's fiction, so I thought that by focusing on a saga I would be able to analyse this aspect in greater depth.<sup>8</sup> Thirdly, the Courtney novels take place mainly in South Africa, whose history Smith uses as a backdrop and which he manipulates for his own purposes. Although born in Rhodesia, Wilbur Smith was brought up and educated in South Africa, where he has his permanent residence. By centring my argument on this saga, therefore, I assumed I could study how the author approaches his own personal socio-historical circumstances, especially the apartheid context, and how these have conditioned his writing. In the fourth place, the Courtney novels are probably, together with his two Egyptian tales, *River God* (1993) and *The Seventh Scroll* (1995), Smith's most representative and popular works.<sup>9</sup> Last but not least, I had to take practical considerations into account. One of the best pieces of advice I was supplied with when I began to feel overwhelmed by quotations and stories began to coalesce into one another, came from a colleague and a friend. He told me that if I intended to conduct textual analysis, I should focus on a few representative texts that would allow me to draw conclusions about the rest and to reach a better, deeper and more intimate understanding of the author I wanted to analyse. Furthermore, I had just read Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* and the following words from one of the characters in the novel were still reverberating in my mind, "I believe that it is better to know one book intimately than a hundred

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<sup>8</sup> The only other novels that focus on a single family are the Ballantyne novels, which take place in Zimbabwe: *A Falcon Flies* (1980), *Men of Men* (1981), *The Angels Weep* (1982) and *The Leopard Hunts in Darkness* (1984).

<sup>9</sup> To give an example, to the question, 'Who is your favourite Wilbur Smith character?' (see: <http://members.tripod.com/~rollindice/answerone.html>), Taita (from *River God*) received 40% of the votes, followed by Sean Courtney I, who received 25% of the votes. Other characters that received votes are: Centaine (*The Burning Shore*, *Power of the Sword*, *Rage* and *Golden Fox*), Kratas (*River God*), Nicholas Quenton-Harper (*The Seventh Scroll*) and Henry Courtney, Hal, (*Birds of Prey* and *Monsoon*). On another web page (<http://members.tripod.com/~rollindice/firstws.html>), seven Wilbur Smith fans recount their first experience with the author. Except for one, they all got hooked on Wilbur when reading one of the following Courtney novels: *When the Lion Feeds*, *The Sound of Thunder*, *A Time to Die* and *Birds of Prey*.

superficially.”<sup>10</sup> One book would certainly not have been enough, but I thought that a (more or less) intimate knowledge of ten, six-hundred-page Wilbur Smith novels would allow me to be more precise, less vague and more specific in my conclusions.

As for the contents of my dissertation, they revolve around the question that was the point of departure of my thesis: my exclusion from the adventurous panorama Smith fashions in the narrative. The conclusion I reached is certainly obvious. Although Smith's narratives integrate women characters and include considerable doses of romance, they are, nevertheless, written in the masculine; the narrative space Smith creates is just a playground for macho adventurers who, indeed, do not come bigger or more macho than Wilbur Smith's. No wonder I could not relate to them. Yet, what I wanted to sort out is the reason for this 'orgy of manliness' in our present-day world where society is being reshaped to grant women a voice in the public sphere, gender role expectations are being questioned and the battle of the sexes has generated brand new types of human beings (at least in the representational arts), namely the New Woman (the liberated woman who is equal, with a vengeance, to the male) and the New Man (a more feminine and introspective alternative to tough macho masculinities). Also, I wanted to understand why Smith keeps throwing in, even in his latest novels, the kind of white-on-black attitudes that now, in our Politically Correct state of affairs, are better kept private, especially in the still razor-wired, post-apartheid South African laager. My attempted explanation for these aspects, in fact, informs and shapes my thesis.

My contention in this dissertation is that Smith includes overtly masculinist and racist messages that readers swallow down along with the formulaic pap, and that this ideological slant responds to three basic and interrelated conditionings: the literary substratum at the basis of Smith's narratives, which I regard as examples of imperialist adventure in the purest Rider Haggard tradition and which determine many of the characteristics of Smith's work; the crisis of masculinity supposedly affecting western men and which force some men to go back to reactionary imaginings of masculinity of an imperial kind in order to reactivate notions of self-confidence, self-

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<sup>10</sup> Donna Tartt, *The Secret History* (London: Penguin Books, 1993) 34.

esteem and self-respect in a world that seems to be deserting them; and Smith's particular socio-historical context, the rabidly colonial structuring of South African society which affected and conditioned the lives of black men but also those of white men: surrounded by a majority of black men and intent on maintaining supremacy over them, white men lived in a constant state of paranoia, which per force affected their national and gendered self-image and the way they presented themselves in the representational arts. These three conditionings determine the structure of my thesis, which is divided into three parts, each dealing with one of these aspects.

In my dissertation, however, I do not only attempt to elucidate the reasons that account for the masculinist and racist ethos in Smith's works. I also attempt to explain how the author constructs a white supremacist and masculinist world, the tensions this generates and the narrative strategies Smith utilises in order to maintain his particular ideological slant in spite of external pressures and the changing social, cultural and historical trends assailing modern society in general and South Africa in particular, and which the author cannot afford to disregard. In *Birds of Prey*, van de Velde, one of the villains, snatches the journal his secretary keeps and proceeds to analyse its contents; when he finds aspects that do not conform to his particular version of events, he becomes angry and "[w]ith a series of broad strokes he [expurgates] those parts of the text that [offend] him." (*Birds* 242) Smith, consciously or unconsciously, does the same in his novels. As the author and master of what he writes, Smith has absolute power over the narratives. Yet, his hold is not always so tight and elements of anti-masculinist and anti-racist significance slip into his texts and force him to resort to narrative tactics in order to make them ultimately conform to the ideological perspective from which he writes. These strategies are analysed in parts 2 and 3, in which I address Wilbur Smith's texts directly and analyse them. It is in these two parts as well, that I analyse external socio-historical motivations that explain and contextualise Smith's works and I show how the author gives flesh to his ideal of heroic masculinity, lays down a masculinist code of behaviour, gives his assent to the patriarchal status quo, creates purely 'male spaces' and resorts to colonial stereotypes and apartheid myths in order to privilege the white body over the black body. The first part of the dissertation, on the other hand, deals with Smith's literary substratum: the

realm of the popular in general and the generic determinants of adventure and, especially, imperialist adventure which I identify as the tradition which Smith, via his fiction, perpetuates. This generic approach is only intended to serve as a context for what Smith writes. I have abstained from providing in-depth analyses of the works that comprise this tradition on purpose since it would have taken up too much space and would have departed considerably from my main objective in this dissertation: that of focusing on Smith and the masculinist, patriarchal and racist perspectives Smith propagandises in his fiction as a response / backlash against uncongenial conditions for white men in western society.

In retrospect, I realise now there is one aspect I have involuntarily disregarded and which would probably have helped me reach a better understanding of Smith's fiction. Smith is not the only South African author who writes in the masculine from an imperialist point of view. Other prominent (although less popular) writers of adventure in South Africa are Stuart Cloete, Geoffrey Jenkins and Alan Scholefield.<sup>11</sup> By way of apology, I can only regret not having analysed Smith's contemporary South African adventure writers and express my interest in focusing on these authors in the future in order to further contextualise Wilbur Smith within the popular imperialist adventure tradition.

As for the critical perspective from which I have approached Wilbur Smith's Courtney saga, I have to acknowledge the influence of feminist literary criticism that, as defined by Annette Kolodny, involves "exposing the sexual stereotyping of women in both our literature and our literary criticism and, as well, demonstrating the inadequacy of established critical schools and methods to deal fairly or sensitively with works written by women."<sup>12</sup> As I have mentioned above, my initial approach to Smith's fiction was conditioned by the sense of exclusion many women have felt

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<sup>11</sup> For information on these authors see: Eugene Benson and L.W. Connolly, eds., *The Encyclopedia of Post-Colonial Literatures in English*, 2 vols. (London and New York: Routledge, 1994). Written by John Stotesbury, the entries on these authors can be found in the following pages: Stuart Cloete (vol. 1, 256), Geoffrey Jenkins (vol. 1, 730-731) and Alan Scholefield (vol. 2, 1418). In the same reference book and also written by John Stotesbury, there is the entry 'Popular Writing (South Africa)', which offers a panorama of popular writing by white South Africans (vol. 2, 1297-1300).

<sup>12</sup> Annette Kolodny, "Dancing Through the Minefield. Some Observations on the Theory, Practice and Politics of Feminist Literary Criticism," *The New Feminist Criticism. Essays on Women, Literature and Theory*, ed. Elaine Showalter (London: Virago, 1986) 144.

when reading books written by men, expecting to find themselves and finding, instead, “whores, bitches, muses, and heroines dead in childbirth.”<sup>13</sup> The influence of feminist literary criticism determines my descriptive perspective when dealing with how Smith presents masculine and feminine stereotypes, with which I want to unpack Smith’s patriarchal and masculinist baggage and render it visible. Some critics, especially Toril Moi, find this descriptive perspective counter-productive, a mere attempt to state the obvious. They think that this continual re-telling of the story of female repression by patriarchy locks “feminist criticism into a constraining and problematic relation with the very authoritarian and patriarchal criticism it seeks to surmount.”<sup>14</sup> I particularly find ‘the obvious’ is not really so obvious. Smith’s heroines, for instance, are only ‘obviously’ strong in appearance since, on analysis, they are just representatives of docile stereotypes of femininity. As for the usefulness of this type of analysis, I agree with Belsey and Moore<sup>15</sup> that the practice of reading and identifying gender relations in literature is one of the venues in the struggle for change in the gender relations which prevail in society. As Warhol and Price Herndl, writing about the role of feminist literary critics, put it:

[t]he oppression of women is a fact of life, [...] gender leaves its traces in literary texts and on literary history, and [...] feminist criticism plays a worthwhile part in the struggle to end oppression in the world outside the text.<sup>16</sup>

Although feminist literary criticism has been essential to direct my approach when dealing with Smith’s Courtney novels and has determined my concern for how Smith represents women as opposed to men in the saga, I have to confess I have danced adroitly through the theoretical minefield, looking for perspectives that could illumine and clarify my intuitions and unashamedly borrowing them. Books on gender and masculinity have been essential for my understanding of male psychology and behaviour, as well as for identifying the anxiety supposedly assailing modern western

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<sup>13</sup> Annette Kolodny, “Dancing Through the Minefield. Some Observations on the Theory, Practice and Politics of Feminist Literary Criticism,” *The New Feminist Criticism*, ed. Elaine Showalter, 144.

<sup>14</sup> Raman Selden and Peter Widdowson, *A Reader’s Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory* (Hewel Hempstead, Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993) 219.

<sup>15</sup> Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore, introduction, *The Feminist Reader. Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism*, ed. Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989).

<sup>16</sup> Robin Warhol and Diane Price Herndl, introduction, *Feminisms. An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, ed. Robin Warhol and Diane Price Herndl (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1992) x.

men in times of gender-role transformation. Postcolonial criticism has informed my study of the representation of black men in the Courtney saga. Studies on the popular in general and the genre of adventure in all its permutations have allowed me to understand the parameters within which Smith's works are produced. The social and apartheid contexts surrounding Smith's works have come from a variety of history books and books on masculinity and gender in society. Calling oneself Marxist has become problematic of late. The failure of the political applications of Marx's tenets by his ideological descendants in eastern European or postcolonial African countries make people 'in the west' regard anything containing the Marxist label with suspicion at best. Yet, Marxist criticism has been basic to my understanding of how texts cannot really be comprehended without taking into account the historical, cultural and social context in which they have been produced. I am also indebted to Marxist criticism - especially Gramsci - and poststructuralism, for the idea of texts as vehicles of ideology or as discourses at the service of the powers-that-be. These critical perspectives have determined how I have approached Smith's works as purveyors of ideology, propagandising a patriarchal, masculinist and white supremacist status quo. Above all, and to conclude with this introduction, my approach to Smith's Courtney saga has remained textual. It is Smith's novels as texts and expression of the author's worldview and ideological slant that I have always regarded as my main object of study. I have not considered market consumption and reader response. These would have required ethnographic and empirical research that I had no intention of conducting for the writing of my dissertation. These, however, as I explain in the conclusion, remain areas I expect to delve into in the future.



**Part I**

**Genre and ideology.**

**Wilbur Smith's literary background**

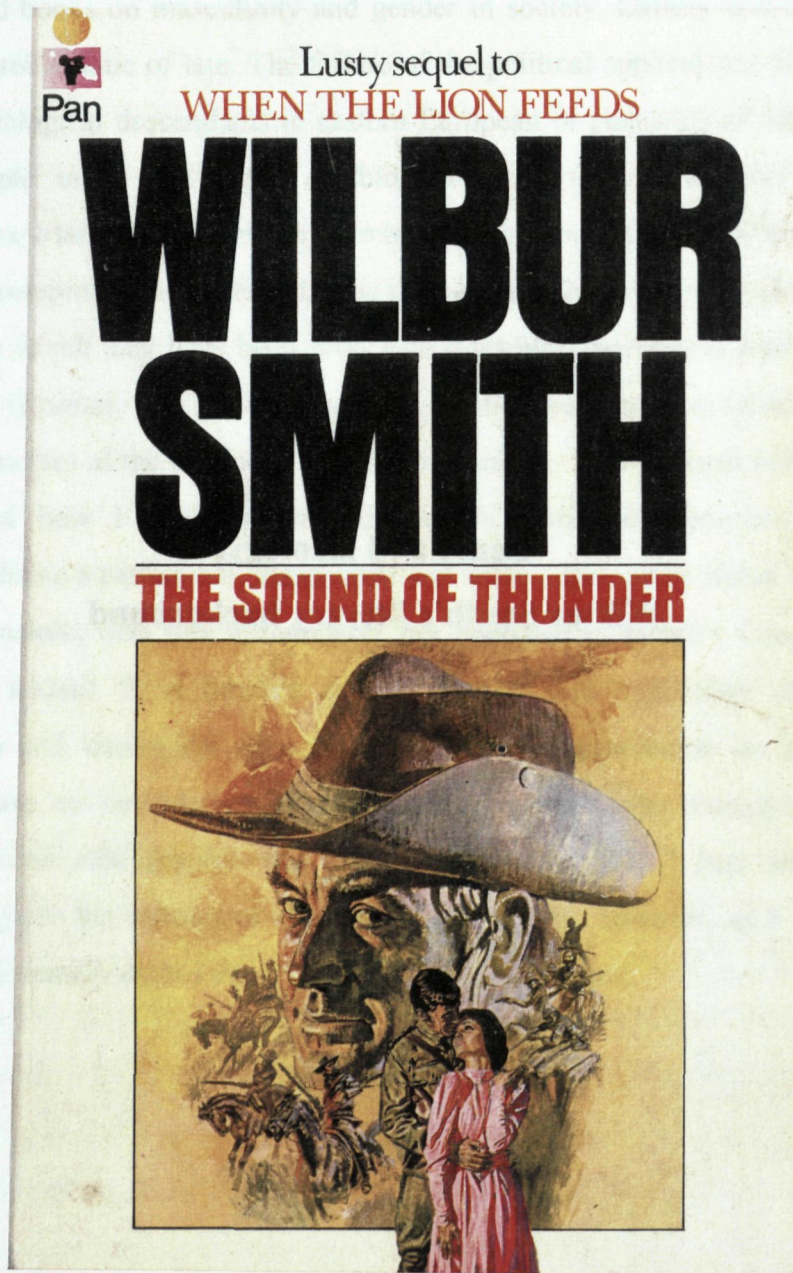


Figure 2. Cover for Wilbur Smith's *The Sound of Thunder* (London: Pan, 1968).

## Chapter 1: Popular narratives, the concept of genre and ideology. Introductory considerations

### 1.1. Popular narratives versus 'High Literature'

I think that over the years my readership has found that they are going to get a story that moves forward at a good clip - a good story, in fact - and that in the process they might find quite a lot of interesting aspects about obscure subjects like from deep sea diving to gold-mining. But I think really the thing is the old thing of the ability to tell a story, like the old wandering minstrels, or the Bushman sitting at the fire reciting the story of the tribe, and everybody, I think, from eight to eighty, enjoys a good story. I am an entertainer more than anything else.<sup>1</sup>

When we, the readers, pay good money for a Wilbur Smith novel we expect to spend a good time, to be caught in the grip of fast-paced adventure, to temporarily escape from the frustrations of our daily life and our down-to-earth problems, to hold our breath while faced with action as bright and explosive as a fireworks display. In a nutshell, we want to be entertained. And Wilbur Smith is, for sure, a good entertainer. He seems to know exactly how to mix the ingredients of the imperialist adventure formula, season them with elements of romance, thriller, family saga, melodrama and even western, spread them over a foundation of historical data, and come up with the right recipe people will buy again and again with the certainty it is not going to disappoint them as it is action-crammed, what some critics call 'a thundering good read'.

In spite of his undeniable qualities as a story-teller, Wilbur Smith, together with most of the representatives of what is referred to as genre, popular or formulaic narratives,<sup>2</sup> has not been considered to be worthy of serious study by the majority of

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<sup>1</sup> John A. Stotesbury, "Popularising Late-Apartheid South Africa. An Interview with Wilbur Smith," *Teaching & Learning. Working Papers in English Studies from the University of Joensuu*, 2 (1996): 80.

<sup>2</sup> Although I occasionally use the terms 'popular fiction' and 'popular literature' instead of 'popular narratives' throughout my dissertation, it is the form of the novel that I have in mind. If I use 'fiction' and 'literature' it is mostly to avoid repetition, but also because most of the characteristics of popular

literary pundits. For a long time, popular literature in general has been a neglected subject since scholars regarded it as aesthetically and intellectually trivial, essentially worthless. As Martin Green phrases the idea:

[W]hen we approach the arts via the fine arts, as we do in the academy, we get a biased view of them. We tend to see popular poems and novels as inferior imitations of, or substitutions for, 'great poetry' or 'great novels', when in fact they have aims and values of their own that are significantly and sometimes proudly different.<sup>3</sup>

Traditional academic study has been devoted to a segment which has been canonised within the academic institution: the canon (also referred to as Literature, serious literature, fine art or highbrow culture), which is considered "an order of 'timeless monuments' or eternal truths,"<sup>4</sup> and whose major virtue, apart from an acknowledged superior aesthetic quality, is that it is part of "the moral community of culture"<sup>5</sup> and has the intrinsic property of preventing society "from falling into anarchy or some undesirable state such as philistinism."<sup>6</sup>

The literary canon (that is, the authors and texts that are widely respected, seen to be self-evidently important, 'good things' to study) has remained remarkably stable. As Bob Ashley asserts:

Shakespeare, Chaucer and Milton, Austen, Hardy and Lawrence are among the dozen or so writers who appear time and again in the syllabuses of English courses at all levels. There may be space occasionally for lesser known authors,

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narratives can also be applied to other popular forms of literary production (comics, plays, poems, etc.). I also use the term narrative to include films (and on occasion television serials / series), which I often use for comparison with novels I analyse and as examples of the representational arts. If I use films as examples of narratives it is because I regard them as stories with plots, backgrounds and characters. I never attempt to study them from a technical / production / audience point of view, basically because I do not have the specialised knowledge to do so, but also because the type of analysis I conduct is mostly textual and also because I like to see them as narratives that fulfil similar functions to popular novels. Of course, I am aware of the fact that the distinction between 'high' and 'low', 'elitist / high quality' and 'popular / low quality' could also be applied to films. Without attempting to join a debate that is beyond the objectives of this dissertation, I want to highlight that I find quality judgements detrimental to the study of the popular in general. Anyway, the films I use for comparison are mostly box-office successes and, as such, examples of the popular understood as greatly enjoyed by a large number of people.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Green, *Seven Types of Adventure Tale. An Ethiology of a Major Genre*, 26.

<sup>4</sup> Jane Radford, introduction, *The Progress of Romance. The Politics of Popular Fiction*, ed. Jane Radford (London and New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986) 5.

<sup>5</sup> Jerry Palmer, *Potboilers. Methods, Concepts and Case Studies in Popular Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991) 2.

<sup>6</sup> Jerry Palmer, *Potboilers*, 4.



but any controversy is usually at the periphery. For the student there is no problem of definition of field of study: her task is simply to become skilled in writing about the well-established texts.<sup>7</sup>

The study of the canon, therefore, has stayed deeply ingrained in the groves of academe, and has enjoyed an unquestionable starring role in the English Literature syllabus. Meanwhile, popular literature, together with other non-canonical literature, has remained behind the peripheral trenches defending itself from the ‘quips, sentences and paper bullets of the brain’ of critics such as Q.D. Leavis,<sup>8</sup> R.W. Adorno<sup>9</sup> and Harold Bloom,<sup>10</sup> who have reported a general decline in the level of culture in industrial societies, and have found popular literature is implicated as a symptom and cause of that decline. Characterised by a deeply-embedded cultural pessimism and unrepentant élitism, these critics have even gone as far as to predict systematic cultural degeneration if efforts are not directed toward training in authentic taste, “genuine feeling” and “responsible thinking,”<sup>11</sup> that cannot be achieved by studying ‘base’ popular literature. Harold Bloom has even filled *The Western Canon* with apocalyptic statements envisioning a future world of shadows and chaos if readers are not given access to a fine, ‘mind-enlightening’, superior code.<sup>12</sup>

Critics are not alone in their denunciation of popular literature. Students who confess an interest in popular literature may encounter a varied range of uncomprehending responses, “from the genuinely incredulous parent - ‘do they *really* study that kind of thing in the colleges these days? - to the aggressively utilitarian - ‘reading Shakespeare is bad enough, but I think it’s a disgrace people are getting state money for reading this trash’. Some other students have to cope with the misgivings of tutors on other, more traditional courses who still identify courses on popular fiction

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<sup>7</sup> Bob Ashley, “Introduction. The Reading of Popular Texts: Some Initial Problems,” *The Study of Popular Fiction. A Source Book*, ed. Bob Ashley (London: Pinter Publishers, 1989) 1.

<sup>8</sup> Q.D. Leavis, “Fiction and the Reading Public,” *The Study of Popular Fiction*, ed. Bob Ashley, 43-48.

<sup>9</sup> R.W. Adorno, “Culture Industry Reconsidered,” *The Study of Popular Fiction*, ed. Bob Ashley, 52-59.

<sup>10</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon* (London: Papermac, 1995).

<sup>11</sup> R.W. Adorno, “Culture Industry Reconsidered,” *The Study of Popular Fiction*, ed. Bob Ashley, 47.

<sup>12</sup> Statements such as the following are common in Harold Bloom’s *The Western Canon*: “Things have however fallen apart, the centre has not held, and mere anarchy is in the process of being unleashed upon what used to be called ‘the learned world.’” (1) “The shadows lengthen in our evening land, and we approach the second millennium expecting further shadowing.” (16).

as ‘soft options’.”<sup>13</sup> And all this is to assume that the student has no lingering doubts of his own as to the validity of the popular, since remaining unprejudiced against a topic that has been the object of continuous attack and entrenched resistance amounts, in my opinion, to ‘mission impossible’. Symptomatic of this assertion is an anecdote that occurred during a lecture on the importance of integrating popular narratives / fiction in the English Philology syllabus delivered by Dr Sara Martín Alegre at the University of Lleida in 1998. When, at the end of the lecture, time came for questions, a student burst out with a statement that elicited the prejudices with which some students, still nowadays, approach the popular. She angrily proclaimed something like, “I do not need a professor to tell me how I should watch a film,” (I think she mentioned *Jaws*) implying she belongs to the cultural context that has produced ‘the popular’, which is ‘rubbish’ (her words), and, consequently, she does not need to study how the popular works. She added, “If I study at university it is because I want to learn how to read Shakespeare properly.” This self-same student, I must add, has no qualms about reading Kazuo Ishiguro, Rose Tremain or Iain Banks (his ‘serious’ fiction, not his science fiction) at university, which, in theory, are products of her cultural context as well and, thus, following her line of thought, self-evidently understandable, easily read without the assistance of analytical tools or from a critical perspective. The unfairness of her tantrum was easily set right by Dr Martín; yet, unfair, biased and, in my opinion, wrong as her ideas may be, they reveal the prejudices and misgivings some students have about the ‘serious’ study of the popular.

Indeed the equation popular literature = mass culture = debased has suffused thinking about popular literature throughout the world. Rejections of this type of literature have been formulated in many different ways, which Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel outline in their book *The Popular Arts*.<sup>14</sup> Though published in 1964, Hall and Whannel’s study still retains a ‘present-day quality’ since it summarises the terms in which the equation popular literature / debased is commonly expressed nowadays. This catalogue of indictments of popular literature is worth mentioning since it

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<sup>13</sup> Bob Ashley, “Introduction. The Reading of Popular Texts: Some Initial Problems,” *The Study of Popular Fiction*, ed. Bob Ashley, 1-2.

<sup>14</sup> Although theirs is a collection of indictments of mass society and culture in general, their arguments can be perfectly applied to popular literature. See: Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel, “The Popular Arts” *The Study of Popular Fiction*, ed. Bob Ashley, 60-64.

represents the frame within which students of popular literature have to conduct their studies; the 'slings and arrows' they have to oppose if they are to undertake research in the dangerous 'shivering sands' of popular literature:

1. Popular literature is nothing but a consumer good. Armies of people are employed to test and analyse, to seek our needs and hidden desires, which are then introduced into books in order to entice readers to buy them. Artistic values have disappeared and popular literature is infected by the ethics of salesmanship.
2. Popular literature is mass-produced to a formula that allows no place for creativity. Experiment and growth have been replaced by gimmicks and fashion.
3. Readers of popular literature are regarded as sheer consumers. Their needs and attitudes as consumers are assessed and analysed but their judgement as men and women is not called upon. Their role is passive and they play no part in decision-making; they only consume what they are persuaded to buy, not what, as members of society, would suit them best.
4. Popular literature defines our sense of reality and organises our experience into stereotypes. We come to believe in the picture of life presented in these books as a portrait of our true world.
5. Popular literature makes us more alike. It does this not merely by manufacturing standardised products but by trivialising the really important.
6. Popular literature threatens fine art. It has little sense of tradition, of values being modified by change.
7. Popular literature exploits rather than satisfies our needs and desires. Not only are appeals made to our worst instincts. "The history of popular taste is largely bound

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up with the discovery by the writing profession of the technique for exploiting emotional responses.”<sup>15</sup>

8. Popular literature flatters mediocrity. Its quality has nothing to do with aesthetic value, but with the number of people who buy a book. ‘The common people’ become the only authority concerning the beauty or excellence of a work of popular literature. As Roger B. Rollin puts it in “Against Evaluation: the Role of the Critic of Popular Culture:”

‘Taste’, formal training, teaching experience, publications - all factors which might be construed as validating the authority of a critic of Elite Culture - stand for naught when it comes to their or anyone else’s evaluation of the ‘quality’ of a Popular Culture work. For, in Popular Culture, the rule is ‘one person - one vote’.<sup>16</sup>

9. Writers are appreciated for their popularity and glamour, the amount of money they make, the anecdotes related to their personal affairs, their image, their public face. The quality of what they produce is irrelevant since we are dazzled by their personality, which we glorify.
10. Popular literature is received in what could be called ‘dream-like passivity’. It encourages us to escape from reality instead of providing us with the tools to face this reality.

These are just some of the most common accusations against popular narratives, which are still deeply-rooted in some conservative academic quarters. However, it would be ludicrous to “overstate the case.”<sup>17</sup> Although much resistance persists and some scholars reject the serious examination of material widely dismissed as trivial, the silence on popular narratives has been broken. As Bob Ashley explains in his revised edition of *The Study of Popular Fiction*, “[T]here have been significant shifts in the emphasis in the academic analysis of popular texts. Increasingly, such

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<sup>15</sup> Q.D. Leavis qtd. in Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel, “The Popular Arts” *The Study of Popular Fiction*, ed. Bob Ashley, 62.

<sup>16</sup> Roger B. Rollin, “Against Evaluation: The Role of the Critic of Popular Culture,” *The Study of Popular Fiction*, ed. Bob Ashley, 18.

<sup>17</sup> Jerry Palmer, *Potboilers*, 3.



analysis occurs in the context of media studies or some combination of categories: media, communication and cultural studies.”<sup>18</sup> Critics have for some time now enlarged or re-focused the scope of their analysis to include popular narratives arguing that, even though they are different from the traditional ‘high forms’ of literary production,<sup>19</sup> they are to be considered art, artistic, artful or aesthetically pleasing<sup>20</sup> and, thus, worthy of critical regard.

Progressively, furthermore, the canon has begun to be questioned on various grounds. To start with, we live in a world in which old certainties and eternal truths no longer apply given that everything is questionable and relative. Postmodernism, or so some critics say, has long since done away with the distinction between high and low art. In fact, one of the many ways in which postmodernism can be read is as a rejection of modernism’s relentless hostility to mass culture. In a post-industrial society geared up to mass production and mass consumption, mass produced narratives should not be ignored, especially since they have become icons which reflect what we are like and the world we live in. Voices, therefore, have increasingly been raised that demand a re-evaluation of our state of affairs and reject the distinction between ‘low’ and ‘high’ art. Back in 1976, for instance, Umberto Eco proclaimed:

Once upon a time there were the mass media, and they were wicked, of course, and there was a guilty party. Then there were the virtuous voices that accused the criminals. And art (ah, what luck) offered alternatives, for those who were not the

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<sup>18</sup> Bob Ashley, preface, *Reading Popular Narrative. A Sourcebook*, ed. Bob Ashley (London and Washington: Leicester University Press, 1997) vii.

<sup>19</sup> David Madden expresses the distinction between high and popular literature saying that some literary people seem to live a double life, thumbing through *The Kenyon Review* in the library, poring over *Playboy* at home. See: David Madden, *Tough Guy Writers of the Thirties* (Illinois: Illinois University Press, 1977).

<sup>20</sup> Professor Robert C. Ferguson argues that an object may be considered art, artistic, artful or aesthetically pleasing if it fulfils any or all of the following:

- a. That it communicates to the receptor; that it elicits some response, negative or positive.
- b. That it somehow changes the receptor’s perception of the world and/or human experience; that the world, life, etc., are somehow changed, not quite the same, once the object is perceived.
- c. That it has a discernible form and/or style.
- d. That it exhibits some quality of craftsmanship: it derives from an imaginative, creative, ingenious source, if only by illusion.
- e. That it transcends pure emotion and gives us dominance over our feelings.
- f. That it represents the fulfilment of human wish or fantasy.
- g. That it speaks to a sense of mystery in life and world experience.

(These ideas were taken from personal notes kindly passed on to me by Dr Manuel González de la Aleja; I do not have bibliographical reference).

victims of the mass media. Well, it's all over. We have to start again from the beginning, asking one another what's going on.<sup>21</sup>

Secondly, contrary to Q.D. Leavis' claims on the civilising effect of higher fiction, Literature has not lived up to the task of civilisation and "*great art* does not preclude personal and institutional bestiality."<sup>22</sup> (emphasis added) Thirdly, the greatness and importance of a small group of literary works, to the detriment of others, is established by a limited group of people, so it is not the product of subjective collective taste (whose existence is questionable), and greatness is not an objective property of the text (although structuralists hold a different opinion). And finally, to mention just a few of the possible objections to the superiority of canonical literature over popular literature, the canon is not a fixed entity whose greatness is immediately established the moment the author writes the text, but rather a historical construct whose importance is determined by a group of intellectuals at a particular period of time, and does not necessarily have to maintain the same status in the following generations as can be appreciated from an example Northrop Frye provides:

Spenser has acquired a reputation of poet's poet and storehouse of recondite allusion and allegory; but in his day *The Faerie Queene* was regarded as pandering to a middlebrow appetite for stories about fearless knights and beauteous maidens and hideous ogres and dragons, instead of following the sober classical models.<sup>23</sup>

Little by little, therefore, the distinction between high and low literature is losing ground, although, as Christopher Pawling asserts, in some academic circles they are still reluctant to grant popular literature the same status high literature occupies, and turn up their nose when somebody suggests a course on science fiction or the thriller could be introduced into the curriculum:

Although there has been a growth of interest in popular fiction over the last few years, one could not claim it has been established in schools or colleges as a central component of literary studies. The English lecturer who proposes a course in this area may well be told that it would be difficult to find space on a timetable for such a 'minor' field of study, although the same objections do not seem to

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<sup>21</sup> Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality* (San Diego and New York: Harvest / Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976) 150.

<sup>22</sup> Bob Ashley, "Introduction. The Reading of Popular Texts: Some Initial Problems," *The Study of Popular Fiction*, ed. Bob Ashley, 3.

<sup>23</sup> Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture* (Cambridge: Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976) 28.

apply when one of his / her colleagues suggests yet another option in seventeenth-century poetry. A course dealing with popular genres such as science fiction or thrillers is, apparently, a luxury which the department cannot afford.<sup>24</sup>

So, although there is still some entrenched resistance as some scholars harbour conservative tendencies, some other scholars have, for some time now, devoted time and effort to the serious study of popular genres on the grounds that 90%<sup>25</sup> of what constitutes the domain of literature cannot be disregarded, especially as everything which can be included in what is referred to as 'mass culture' (such as popular literature, cinema and television) has grown enormously since the Second World War, and recession and unemployment have strengthened this trend in the 80s and 90s, to the extent that "a clear interaction between elite and popular art forms, written and television productions [have] now marked even the 'highest' of literary forms."<sup>26</sup>

## 1.2. The artistry behind popular literature: the concepts of formula and genre

Given the importance of popular literature and the influence it has on 'high art', one cannot proscribe it and consider it an inferior or perverted form simply because of its goals of escape and entertainment. However, popular narratives have always been the 'dusty Cinderella' relegated to the peripheral recesses of the 'palace of art'; but in the fairy world of literature, there has been no redeeming magic wand. Critics have acknowledged the need to study this form of narratives on the grounds that it constitutes the principal, perhaps only, fictional reading of the majority of the population in modern industrial societies, it is widely assumed to influence lives profoundly, and it is surely of major significance in the understanding of those lives, particularly the processes by which meanings are constructed and exchanged. But in spite of the new interest popular narratives have aroused, the 'from rags to riches' process has not always followed. More often than not, the study of popular narratives is conducted from the perspective of the social sciences, which regard this form of

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<sup>24</sup> Christopher Pawling, "Introduction: Popular Fiction: Ideology or Utopia?" *Popular Fiction and Social Change*, ed. Christopher Pawling (London: MacMillan, 1984) 1.

<sup>25</sup> Christopher Pawling, "Introduction: Popular Fiction: Ideology or Utopia?" *Popular Fiction and Social Change*, ed. Christopher Pawling, 2.

<sup>26</sup> Jane Radford, introduction, *The Progress of Romance*, ed. Jane Radford, 1.

fiction as a diagnostic tool for analysing social trends in society without necessarily granting it the status of self-respecting art. Consequently, some scholars still see popular narratives as 'second-rate' fiction, cultural 'detritus' or 'residuum', the 'left-overs'. As Leslie A. Fiedler puts it, these texts are still "denied the quasi-immortality bestowed by [...] critics to the 'Classics'."<sup>27</sup>

Having said that, it would be absurd to develop an 'inferiority complex' or to feel victimised only for being involved in the study of literary forms traditionally considered debased and vulgar. It would also be absurd to pretend that popular narratives (also known as 'genre' or 'formulaic' narratives, which are widely read by vast sections of society and which are apparently enjoyed to the full) share the same space and characteristics as other more elitist forms of literature (i.e. 'the canon', 'the classics' or 'high literature'). Sentimental literature, horror literature, pornography, romance or adventure, to mention just a few examples of popular narrative, are a group apart with their own interests and justifications, which in no way implies that they are of inferior quality. Consequently, we have to short-circuit evaluative oppositions such as 'low' and 'high', 'popular' or 'serious literature'. We have to avoid playing sorting-out games distinguishing 'serious novelists' from 'mere entertainers', and 'Best Sellers' from 'Art Novels', denying entertainers and best seller writers any claim to quality.<sup>28</sup> As Matthew Lipman puts it:

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<sup>27</sup> Leslie Fiedler, "Towards a Definition of Popular Literature," *The Study of Popular Fiction*, ed. Bob Ashley, 11.

<sup>28</sup> It is worth highlighting, at this stage, that 'best-selling status' is not only achieved by popular narratives; consumer habits do not tell us anything meaningful about the literary pretensions / quality of a work of art. The institutionalisation and popularisation of literary prizes such as the Booker and the Whitbread Award in England have influenced reading tastes, as well as directing consumer practices, of readers in England for over the last two decades. 'Serious literary products', therefore, have become 'consumer products' which have reached best-selling status, so they are no longer the preserve of an elitist and 'sophisticated' group of literary pundits entrenched in the groves of academe as representatives of knowledge and 'proper taste' as opposed to the 'unsophisticated', 'gullible' masses. Year after year, with only very few exceptions, the Booker winner makes it to the Alex Hamilton's annual list of the top hundred paperback fastsellers. The list, which before 1982 included only popular narratives, now includes works regarded as serious literary fiction, which problematises the idea that only popular narratives are mass consumed and mass produced and that literary taste is the province of a few, very sophisticated, academics. Self-evident 'classics' such as, for example, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters* have also reached fastselling status as a result of the popularity of their BBC television adaptations in 1995 and 1999 respectively; so even 'classics' have become products to be consumed by the public. In fact, they have been integrated into the heritage industry, which aims at making a profit by selling objects belonging to or imitating the past (from petticoats to jewellery or books about or written in the past), and at nurturing modern man's nostalgia for a-past-that-is-no-more by offering 'the past' as an object you can have access to if you are ready to

An eagerness to portray the population of works of art as made up of 'good works of art' and 'bad works of art' is rather akin to the infantile moralism that reduces the human population to a contrast between 'good guys' and 'bad guys'.<sup>29</sup>

Popular narratives, like other forms of literature, have the capacity to construct alternative worlds into which we can temporarily retreat.<sup>30</sup> And the creation of this world necessarily requires artistry. Popular narratives, therefore, must possess certain characteristics which constitute their artistry, their own leitmotifs and defining traits, which are outlined here:<sup>31</sup>

1) Authors of popular literature, according to Cawelti,<sup>32</sup> write to a formula.<sup>33</sup> In general terms, a literary formula is a structure of narrative or dramatic conventions<sup>34</sup> employed in a great number of individual works. As Cynthia S. Hamilton phrases it:

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pay money for it. For studies of the Booker and consumption and of Jane Austen and the heritage industry see, respectively: Richard Todd, *Consuming Fictions. The Booker Prize and Fiction in Britain Today* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996); Roger Sales, *Jane Austen and Representations of Regency England* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996).

<sup>29</sup> Matthew Lipman, *Contemporary Aesthetics* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1973) 429.

<sup>30</sup> Some critics such as Robert Warshaw even assert that the chief function of popular fiction is to relieve one of the necessity of experiencing one's life directly. See: Robert Warshaw, *The Immediate Experience: Movies, Comics, Theatre, and Other Aspects of Popular Culture* (New York: Atheneum, 1979).

<sup>31</sup> The artistry of popular literature, or what Cawelti calls formulaic literature, is carefully explained in the influential study: John Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery and Romance. Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1976). Although hermetic, leaving almost no room for fragmentation and subdivision or for the consideration of the multiple interrelations between popular narratives and other cultural 'objects' (or, for that matter, even between the popular and 'high' art), Cawelti's study of popular narratives is especially relevant for his positive evaluation of the popular, which he regards as an art worthy of serious study.

<sup>32</sup> The concern of critics such as Neale and Cawelti, together with other influential structuralists such as Barthes, Propp or Wright, is not as much the individual text in and for itself, but rather its relation to a whole range of other texts. The exploration of those relations identifies the systems of fiction within which texts offer meanings to readers. These systems are what Cawelti calls 'formula' and Neale 'genre'.

<sup>33</sup> American eye surgeon Robin Cook, for instance, and just to mention an obvious - if exaggerated - example of a writer writing to a formula, decided he wanted to write a best-seller, so he took a crash course in the writing of popular fiction, scrutinising *The New York Times* best-sellers lists, and making a painstaking study of those novelists with sales of million copies or over. After reading 150 such novels in order to extricate the conventions, he wrote *Coma*, employing every trick of the suspense thriller. Before publishing it he secured the sale of the film rights and, in one day, Cook was able to sell hardback, paperback and movie right and secure the necessary exposure to make *Coma* a hit. See: Ken Worpole, "Reading by Numbers. Contemporary Publishing and Popular Fiction," *The Study of Popular Fiction*, ed. Bob Ashley, 7-8.

<sup>34</sup> Elements which are known to both the creator and his audience beforehand; they consist of things such as favourite plots, stereotyped characters, accepted ideas, commonly known metaphors and other linguistic devices.

Formula is in fact merely a set of interrelated conventional elements found in a large number of individual works. Such conventions spring from an agreement between writers and readers which allows the artist to simplify his material and to control, through concentration, the reader's connotative associations.<sup>35</sup>

Within this definition, we have to include two different usages:

a. A conventional way of treating some specific topic or person; that is patterns of convention which are usually quite specific to a particular period and do not mean the same outwith this specific context:

e.g. Blondes were traditionally portrayed as pure and virginal in the nineteenth century; nowadays, after Marilyn Monroe and Sharon Stone, we have a different idea of the relationship between blondness and sexual purity.

b. The second common literary use of the term formula refers to larger plot types: story types that, if not universal in their appeal, have certainly been popular in many different times (what scholars call 'archetypes': patterns that appeal in many different cultures).

Formulas combine these two sorts of literary phenomenon; so, for example, to create a western involves not only some understanding of how to construct an exciting adventure story, but also how to use certain nineteenth and twentieth century images and symbols - such as cowboys, pioneers, outlaws, frontier towns, and saloons, along with the appropriate cultural themes such as nature versus civilisation, the code of the West, or law and order versus outlawry - to support and give significance to the action. Consequently we can say that a formula is a combination or synthesis of a number of specific cultural conventions within a more universal story form or archetype.

There is a good deal of confusion about the terms 'formula' and 'genre' since critics often use them to designate the same thing, that is, a pattern of cultural conventions, spread over a universal story-type foundation, that appear in a group of

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<sup>35</sup> Cynthia S. Hamilton, *Western and Hard-Boiled Detective Fiction in America. From High Noon to Midnight* (Houndsmill: Macmillan Press, 1987) 2.

related works and which determine the nature of each of these works.<sup>36</sup> Some other critics, on the other hand, find it convenient to differentiate between the two. Cawelti, for instance, uses genre in the sense developed by Northrop Frye in *The Anatomy of Criticism*.<sup>37</sup> In his account, genres appear as archetypes, structural patterns which represent universal story-lines or myths which manifest themselves in all human cultures. He writes:

[G]enre can be defined as a structural pattern which embodies a universal pattern or myth in the materials of language. Formula, on the other hand, is cultural; it represents the way in which a particular culture has embodied both mythical archetypes and its own preoccupations in a narrative form.<sup>38</sup>

Such a distinction, for instance, would allow readers and critics to distinguish Homer's *Odyssey* from Wilbur Smith's *When the Lion Feeds*. They share the same adventure archetype, narrating the action pursuits of a potent hero against obstacles that hinder his advance; but Smith's novel belongs to other social, cultural and literary trends that determine its different conception and general outlook. Yet, I find Cawelti's equation of genre with archetype misleading, especially if we take into account that the original meaning of genre is 'kind' (implying difference between texts belonging to distinct groups and not similarities), and the fact that popular narratives are frequently referred to as 'generic' or 'genre' fiction as well as 'formula' fiction by critics. I think both terms could be used indiscriminately to refer to the

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<sup>36</sup> The definition of genre as, for example, provided by Palmer is very similar to Cawelti's definition of formula:

Genre is [...] seen [...] not just as a series of features that texts share, but as a feature which is directly responsible for the place that all the other elements in these texts occupy, elements which may be very varied but which are always pulled into the space assigned by the dominant procedure. Jerry Palmer, *Potboilers*, 124.

Stephen Neale seems to be more sceptical about the possibility of reaching hermetic categorisations of narratives. Yet, he still finds that genres have established conventions for all audiences (he deals with the concept of genre in the cinema) expect established pattern developments and a particular closure:

Genres institutionalise, guarantee coherence by institutionalising conventions, i.e. sets of expectations with respect to narrative process and narrative closure which may be subject to variation, but which are never exceeded or broken. The existence of genre means that the spectator, precisely, will always know that everything will be 'made right in the end', that everything will cohere, that any threat or any danger in the narrative process itself will always be contained. Stephen Neale, "Genre," *The Study of Popular Fiction*, ed. Bob Ashley, 112.

<sup>37</sup> Northrop Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism. Four Essays* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1973).

<sup>38</sup> John Cawelti, *The Six-Gun Mystique* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1971) 30.

different subdivisions that make up the popular. Throughout the dissertation, however, and following Arthur Asa Berger,<sup>39</sup> I use the term 'genre' to identify different types of texts and 'formula' to refer to the different conventions, ingredients found in various genres and sub-genres used in structuring texts. These conventions are intertextual, not genre-specific (meaning that they appear in different genres; generally the difference between these lies in the emphasis placed on the different elements in each of the genres or the different approach from which these elements are dealt with), and may be subject to evolution, distortion or adaptation to the author's personal approach to a genre.<sup>40</sup> Yet, the generic approach is useful in order to categorise forms of fiction; it provides us with insights about what texts are (or should be) like, how they are created, and how they function for audiences / readership. It also shapes up our expectations of what novels, films, television shows or videos we will be seeing / reading. And above all, it enables us to talk about the relationship of texts to other texts in terms of form as well as of content.

2) Popular narratives do not try to imitate the world outside, or, at least, in theory, this is not the main objective of their creators; instead their main aim is to help us readers to escape from reality, as Stephen King comments:

What about reality, you ask? Well, as far as I am concerned, reality can go to take a flying fuck at a rolling doughnut. I've never held much of a brief for reality, at least in my written work. All too often it is to the imagination what ash stakes are to vampires.<sup>41</sup>

Or when he asserts:

For me, that's it. That's when everything trips over and I'm gone, and you say, 'I fell through the world. I'm out of this crap. I'm somewhere else.' For me, that's really a nice thing, like 'Toto, I don't think we're in Kansas anymore.' That's a

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<sup>39</sup> Arthur Asa Berger, *Popular Culture Genres. Theories and Texts* (Newbury Park, California: Sage, 1992).

<sup>40</sup> The novels by Patricia Cornwell, for instance, can be regarded as examples of detective fiction; yet, she has given the detective a new outlook by turning her heroine into a forensic pathologist (she is Virginia's Chief Medical Examiner), who has to fight against crime as well as against the prejudices in a masculinist context of institutionalised male power. The basic conventions of detective fiction, however, are maintained. The stories still turn around the investigation of a crime and the necessity to find the criminal if order is to be re-established in society.

<sup>41</sup> Stephen King, introduction, *Nightmares and Dreamscapes* (London: New English Library, 1993) 6.



wonderful moment and you say, 'Thank God you're not, Dorothy, because it's a lot more fun over here. You'll meet people you've never met over there.'<sup>42</sup>

Although the escapist nature of popular narratives would not distinguish them from other literary forms - we have to take into account that the ancients already understood the *deleitare* function of literature - what makes popular narratives distinctive is the nature of the world we are supposed to escape to when reading these narratives, a world that does not necessarily have anything to do with our experience. Of course it offers valid and often insightful comments about the world we live in. Yet, the worlds created in popular narratives operate according to their own conventions, codes and iconic elements that do not have to coincide with anything existing in 'reality'. We become familiar with them by repetition, because they get standardised into a pattern (what I have previously termed formula) that is distinctive for each of the genres and sub-genres. Thus, for instance, the world created in hard-boiled detective narratives is one where a tough, often lonesome, detective fights against crime (often organised crime that operates from the city's underworld but whose tentacles reach the highest echelons of institutionalised power); the hard-boiled detective often exposes corruption but does not cure it; however, he is able to deliver punishment to at least some of the evil-doers who are symptoms of the generalised corruption the hero discloses, so he unfailingly manages to assuage the readers' supposed need for chaos to be overridden, order to be re-established. The world of romance, to mention another example, operates by the interaction of a hero and a heroine who, in spite of obstacles or an original, often mutual, dislike, end together in oneness and the promise of happiness, which is experienced by readers as eternal in spite of our knowledge of divorce statistics or the problems resulting from a lack of emotional adjustment within the world of inter-personal relationships. Having said that, it is worth emphasising that genres constantly cannibalise conventions that supposedly 'belong' to other genres. Genres have a voracious appetite for novelty so the 'formula' that determines their fictional and peculiar world is constantly altered, adapted or re-formulated to coalesce into new forms. Yet, the underlying pattern, the basic standard elements that make up these fictional worlds remain constant and pervasive. As Neale phrases it: "Genres represent systematisations of [...] variety. Each genre has, to some extent at least, its

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<sup>42</sup> George Beahm, *The Stephen King Story* (London: Warner Books, 1994) 34.

own system of narrative address.”<sup>43</sup> Thus, for instance, the sort of hero who can function effectively in the dangerous world of action narratives has to possess a particular physique: he has to be strong, tough and muscular; he also needs to be an expert fighter and a crack shot. A hero that failed to be bullet-proof and invulnerable at the beginning of the narrative would not function within the world of action.

3) Popular narratives focus on aspects which give you an immediate feeling of excitement, such as action and plot (especially of a violent and exciting sort, involving danger or sex), and not so much on an analysis of character and motivation, what Leslie A. Fiedler calls “the watering of emotions:”

[Popular narratives] move us all the more, touching levels of response deeper and more archaic than those which abide distinctions between instruction and delight [...] [It aims] at the ‘watering of emotions’, rather than purifying or purging them by the way of the famous Aristotelian process of ‘catharsis’. [...] If such works teach us anything it is not to be wise; and if they provide us with pleasure by making us blubber, shiver or sustain an erection, it is a pleasure on the verge of pain. We need, therefore, another term than catharsis to say how we are moved, a term less anal and more erotic. [...] We need to redefine literature in terms of images based on the aspiration of the soul for the divine and the body for other bodies.<sup>44</sup>

This idea is clearly related to the traditional Spanish ‘folletín’, about which Terenci Moix makes the following comment:

Los recursos del folletín eran tan claros y sencillos como toda la narrativa popular. Se basaba en la dosificación calculada de las emociones básicas, sin más arte ni más parte. [...] la vox populi ha adoptado el vocablo para definir cualquier obra donde el sentimiento predomina sobre la razón y la lágrima infecunda sobre el pensamiento provechoso.<sup>45</sup>

Basically, therefore, popular fiction makes use of strong interests and stimuli, generates intense feelings that take us out of ourselves. These intense stimuli allow us to forget about our own existence and enter fully into an imaginary world; they release us temporarily from the limits of rationality, the boundaries of the ego and the burden

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<sup>43</sup> Stephen Neale, “Genre,” *Reading Popular Narrative*, ed. Bob Ashley, 90.

<sup>44</sup> Leslie Fiedler, “Towards a Definition of Popular Literature,” *The Study of Popular Fiction*, ed. Bob Ashley, 14-16.

<sup>45</sup> Terenci Moix, “Lágrimas de Folletín,” *El País Semanal*, 24 Jan. 1994.

of consciousness, by creating a moment of intense insanity. This is of course a generalisation but, as with all generalisations, it contains its grains of 'truth'. Intense stimuli may characterise other forms of literary (or other) production. Authors such as Martin Amis, Iain Banks and Kingsley Amis are regarded as "established [...] major writers, troubling, self-conscious, experimental visionaries" or "technically complex writers,"<sup>46</sup> and their works as examples of serious literary fiction. Yet, they are also characterised by their willingness to shock and to use resources drawn from popular narratives. Malcolm Bradbury, for example, comments that Iain Banks used the figure of the 'serial killer' for his *The Wasp Factory* (1984), whom he "dusted down from [his] role in popular myth, and popular movies, and recycled for the service of modern narrative,"<sup>47</sup> and mixed with an array of psycho-sexual horrors, violence and confusion drawn from the gothic tradition. Serious literary fiction may use potent stimuli (some works are even overtly pornographic when dealing with sex); yet, in popular narratives these are not regarded as additional strategies that enrich the whole. Instead, these stimulant factors are considered constitutive elements of popular narratives, not merely 'appendixes'. When one reads a Wilbur Smith novel one expects huge doses of sex and explicit violence. Stephen King would not be Stephen King if he disregarded the grotesque, the horrid, the putrescent, in order to shock his readers and take them 'out of themselves'.

4) Eucatastrophe is also essential in popular narratives. The creator needs to have the ability to plunge us into a world full of believable scenes packed with excitement while, at the same time, confirming our confidence that in this world things will always work out, the hero will succeed and the villains will receive rightful punishment for their evil deeds. The idea of eucatastrophe, which is so central to popular fiction, responds to two different psychological needs: on the one hand, we seek moments of intense excitement and interest to escape from the boredom and ennui prevalent in our routine, organised lives. And, on the other hand, we seek escape from our consciousness of the ultimate insecurities and ambiguities which affect even the most secure sort of life - death, the failure of love, our inability to accomplish

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<sup>46</sup> Malcolm Bradbury, *The Modern British Novel* (London: Penguin, 1994) 390-391.

<sup>47</sup> Malcolm Bradbury, *The Modern British Novel*, 412.

everything we had hoped for, or the threat of atomic holocaust, for example. In our ordinary course of experience these two impulses or needs are inevitably in conflict:

If we seek order and security, the result is likely to be boredom and sameness. But rejecting order for the sake of change and novelty brings danger and uncertainty.<sup>48</sup>

This conflict is resolved in popular narratives as they are at once ordered and conventional<sup>49</sup> and yet involving danger, uncertainty, violence and sex. In reading or viewing popular fiction, we confront the ultimate excitements of love and death, but in such a way that our basic sense of security and order is never disrupted, first because we know that it is imaginary rather than real experience, and second because the excitement and uncertainty are ultimately controlled and limited by the familiar structure of the story -which will certainly work towards a happy denouement for our hero, as can be appreciated in this example provided by Graham Dawson in his book *Soldier Heroes*:

[I]n Alistair MacLean's adventure thriller *The Guns of Navarone* the reader is involved in a world in which the hero - hanging from his fingertips to a slippery cliff top over a sharp drop to the rocks several hundreds feet below, where his comrade lies injured - is in immediate danger of being discovered by the enemy sentry; only to be saved by another comrade, who leaps over the cliff top in one bound, to plunge his knife into the sentry's body. The story is designed to generate an intense psychic interest, which can flip over at especially heightened moments into actual physical experience of excitement or fear, disgust or arousal. Yet *The Guns of Navarone* is also a rather predictable tale, replete with conventional situations, characters and motifs, recognisable from innumerable other war thrillers [...]. Recognition of these conventions will carry with it definite expectation about the things that are likely to happen [...]. The anticipated moment of predetermined closure [...] enables the position of risk, danger and uncertainty 'within' the adventure text to be enjoyed imaginatively from the position of security 'outside' it, through a narrative movement that both produces excitement and suspense and guarantees its pleasurable release and resolution.<sup>50</sup>

5) Another of the fundamental aspects the writer has to take into consideration in popular fiction, which is closely related to the previous aspect, is the creation of

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<sup>48</sup> John Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery and Romance*, 16.

<sup>49</sup> Adventure stories, for instance, follow a conventional pattern or formula: there is a hero (individual or group) undertaking a quest which involves dangers and difficulties (generally the machinations of a villain), and who is always triumphant, overcoming perils and trials and accomplishing some important moral mission.

<sup>50</sup> Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes. British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994) 54.

suspense, making sure the reader experiences a feeling of uncertainty, insecurity and anxiety. At the same time, he has to make the reader realise that the mysteries which cause the suspense are going to be solved at the end of the story. A good story, therefore, has to sustain suspense until the final revelation, while endowing the hero with the qualities which will eventually enable him to reach the climax of the story successfully. As Neale phrases it with reference to the idea of suspense in the detective novel, suspense is created by placing the detective protagonist in situations where there is "a risk of violence and death;" this narrative convention is "the primary source of its pleasure." He follows, "The viewing subject is thus suspended in a structure which stretches the tensions [of the] narrative to breaking point though never, axiomatically, beyond it."<sup>51</sup>

6) Finally, if popular narratives are to be successful, we have to identify with the protagonist. As Cawelti writes: "all stories involve some kind of identification, for, unless we are able to relate our feelings and experiences to those of the characters in fiction, much of the emotional effect will be lost."<sup>52</sup> Cawelti describes the sort of identification between audience and protagonists in popular fiction in the following terms:

[The purpose of popular narratives] is not to make me confront motives and experiences in myself that I might prefer to ignore but to take me out of myself by confirming an idealised self-image. [...] [The] protagonists [...] are heroes who have the strength and courage to overcome great dangers, lovers who find perfectly suited partners, inquirers of exceptional brilliance who discover hidden truths, or good, sympathetic people whose difficulties are resolved by some superior figure. [...] [C]reation requires the establishment of some direct bond between us and a superior figure while undercutting and eliminating any aspects of the story that threaten our ability to share enjoyably in the triumphs or narrow escapes of the protagonist.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Stephen Neale, "Genre," *Reading Popular Narrative*, ed. Bob Ashley, 90.

<sup>52</sup> John Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery and Romance*, 18.

<sup>53</sup> John Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery and Romance*, 18-19.

### 1.3. Popular narratives and the ideological burden

The characteristics outlined above constitute the aspects that determine the artistry of popular narratives, the overall qualities that any work aspiring or belonging to 'the popular' is supposed to possess.<sup>54</sup> The nature of these characteristics is often determined by interaction with other similar texts as different from other texts, or so structuralists claim. However, there is a tendency among scholars, especially those who study literature through the author, to analyse popular narratives from the perspective of the author as creator, so they establish the distinctive peculiarity of popular narratives by trying to elucidate the particular nature of their writer as different from the author of 'serious literature.' According to Lionel Trilling, for instance, what distinguishes the artist from the neurotic is that whereas the latter is possessed by his fantasy, trapped in his own wish-fulfilment obsessions, the first is completely in command of his fantasy:

What is the difference between, on the one hand, the dream and the neurosis, and, on the other hand, art? That they have certain common elements is of course clear; that unconscious processes are at work in both would be denied by no poet or critic; they share too, though in different degrees, the element of fantasy. But there is a vital difference between them that Charles Lamb saw so clearly in his defence of the sanity of the genius: 'The [...] poet dreams being awake. He is not possessed by his subject but he has dominion over it.' That is the whole difference: the poet is in command of his fantasy, while it is exactly the mark of the neurotic that he is possessed by his fantasy.<sup>55</sup>

Poets such as William Wordsworth and T.S.Eliot equated great art with control over emotions. Emotions, they believed, are to be reflected in your creations, but they have to be emotions recollected in tranquillity. The more perfect the artist, the more completely separate within him will be the man who suffers and the mind which

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<sup>54</sup> Having said that it is worth emphasising that works that reach the status of popular (in the sense of widely read) do not necessarily fulfil all (or for that matter any) of these conventions; and that not all 'popular' narratives are completely formulaic. I have already emphasised this aspect in a previous note, but I want to insist here that what makes a particular author widely popular is not his / her strict obedience to a set of pre-established rules (or formula), but his personal manipulation of conventions, his distinctive approach to a particular genre. Authors that reach best-selling status often work within a generic foundation (horror, thriller, detective, gothic, science fiction, etc.) but all have their own special and very personal touch. However, once they have found their particular niche, they stick to it and work within the parameters that have proved to be successful within the generic conventions they use and whose pattern they subscribe to.

<sup>55</sup> Lionel Trilling qtd. in Wiley Lee Umphlet, *Mythmakers of the American Dream: The Nostalgic Vision in Film, Television, Fiction and the Comic-strip Art* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1983) 30.

creates, for it is not the greatness, the intensity, of the emotions, but the intensity of the artistic process, the pressure, so to speak, under which the fusion takes place, that counts.

If control over emotions is the trade mark of the 'great artist', some critics assert, the defining trait of 'sheer entertainers', which distinguishes them from 'great artists', is their neuroticism, their obsessive emotional involvement with their fantasies. These fantasies are engendered by the interplay of unconscious needs and desires, their creations becoming, using Freudian terminology, the result of drives rising from the Id, being repressed by the Ego and Super-Ego, and finding expression in the narrative. The narrative, therefore, is both an expression of the popular artist's unconscious needs and desires, and the product of his daydreaming, a fantasy world which becomes a substitute for reality. Legend has it that some writers of popular literature, notably Zane Grey and Frederick Faust (Max Brand), who had a miserable childhood, reacted with pugnacity to a world they viewed as essentially hostile, and sought emotional fulfilment from books and their daydreams:

I went for years with a swollen and scarred face because the fights at one school had hardly healed before I had to begin them again in another. All of this, you see, was forcing me thousands of miles away from normalcy in human relations [...] I grew up tall, gangling, crushed with shame because of dodged bills at local stores, learning to withdraw from children of my age, thrown utterly into a world of books and daydreaming, daydreaming, daydreaming.<sup>56</sup>

It is assumed, therefore, that writers of popular narratives do not make any conscious effort to either systematise their emotions into art or imitate reality. Instead, their narratives become pathways to escape from a life viewed negatively, fantasy worlds into which they retreat. Their involvement with their fantasies is even regarded as obsessional<sup>57</sup> and their detachment from reality complete.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Frederick Faust qtd. in Cynthia S. Hamilton, *Western and Hard-Boiled Detective Fiction in America*, 99.

<sup>57</sup> Stephen King explores the obsessional quality of artists of popular literature in his novel *The Dark Half* (New York: Signets, 1989). In this novel, Thad Beaumont, a university professor, tries, unsuccessfully, to win critical applause by writing 'serious literature'. But it is popular narratives, horror stories which he writes under the pen name George Stark, that grant him recognition and fortune. When Beaumont has his first 'serious success', he decides to symbolically kill George Stark and the type of literature he writes. But no artist of popular narratives can really escape from his fantasies. Stark is an

Even though the equation popular narrative / expression of author's daydreaming is appealing, particularly for critics involved in psychoanalysis, and even though authors of popular narrative are apparently emotionally involved with what they create - Wilbur Smith, for example, asserts:

I look upon myself as a storyteller and an entertainer and not at all as a 'literary' figure. When I write it is for myself first and foremost. Unless the story I am telling moves and interests me, I cannot hope to entertain my readers.<sup>59</sup>

- we cannot disregard the socio-cultural background against which the story is produced. We cannot forget that, as Frederic Jameson asserts, narrative is "a form of reasoning about experience and society [which is] of equal dignity to the various types of conceptual thought in service of daily life."<sup>60</sup> We cannot disentangle literature from the culture / society of which it is an embodiment and product and the readers who consume this literature,<sup>61</sup> as Medvedev and Bakhtin put it:

An artistic entity of any type, that is, of any genre, is related to reality according to a double modality; the specifics of this double orientation determine the type of this entity, that is its genre. The work is oriented, first, toward its listeners, and recipients, and toward certain conditions of performance and perception. Second, the work is oriented toward life, from the inside so to speak, by its thematic content. Every genre, in its own way, orients itself thematically toward life, toward its occurrences, its problems, etc.<sup>62</sup>

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independent being who is in complete control of his creator; he resurrects and begins to commit murders as if he was the protagonist of his novels, Alexis Maquina.

<sup>58</sup> Another example of a writer of popular narratives who supposedly wrote in order to escape his grim reality is Edgar Rice Burroughs, who one time was so poor that "the only recreation he could afford was a habit of daydreaming wild adventures on other planets or in wild places of the earth." qtd. in Françoise Pfaff, "Hollywood's Image of Africa," *Commonwealth Essays and Studies. Images of Africa in the New World V* (1981-1982): 100.

<sup>59</sup> Isabel Santaulària, "Lost Among the Stars' Uncoded Messages. In Conversation with Wilbur Smith," *Multi-Cultural Voices*, ed. Brian Worsfold (Lleida: Edicions i Publicacions de la Universitat de Lleida, 1998) 118 (notes 2 and 3).

<sup>60</sup> Frederic Jameson, "Ideology, Narrative Analysis, and Popular Culture," *Theory and Society* 4 (1977): 543.

<sup>61</sup> Throughout this dissertation, my analysis of Wilbur Smith's novels is textual. I take into account the text and the context that produces it, the ideology it serves, as well as the literary tradition, the genre, to which Smith's novels belong. I make assumptions on the type of readership that consumes his novels and how it determines some of the characteristics they have based on references and reviews as well as on a few (very few) people I know who read the novels for fun. My intention is not to conduct ethnographic research; that would be another thesis altogether. I tried to obtain information on whether Smith's readership is mostly male or female, but publishers and editors could not provide this information.

<sup>62</sup> qtd. in Anne Cranny-Francis, *Feminist Fiction. Feminist Uses of Generic Fiction* (Cambridge: Polity, 1990) 22.



And popular narratives are no exception. As Cawelti explains,<sup>63</sup> there is a dialectic between popular narratives and the culture that produces them; they are a cultural product and, consequently, partake of the particular culture which has produced them. He particularly sees popular narratives as collective cultural products, articulating a pattern of fantasy that is at least acceptable to the cultural groups that enjoy them.<sup>64</sup> He argues that the relationship between culture and popular narratives can be seen in four different ways:

1. Popular narratives affirm the existence of a culture's interests and attitudes; they present an imaginary world which supports or represents these existing interests, attitudes and concerns, confirming some strongly held conventional view.

2. Popular narratives resolve tensions and ambiguities resulting from the conflicting interests of different groups within the culture or from ambiguous attitudes towards particular values. The action of the narrative will tend to move from an expression of tension to harmonisation of conflicts.

3. Popular narratives enable readers to explore in fantasy the boundary between the permitted and the forbidden, and to experience the possibility of stepping across this boundary. This is the function of villains in narratives: they allow readers to explore the forbidden without having to withdraw from the values accepted by the community.

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<sup>63</sup> John Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery and Romance*, 20-36.

<sup>64</sup> In this sense, popular narratives could be regarded as an expression of what Jung calls the collective unconscious. Jung positioned a collective unconscious below the threshold of a personal unconscious. The collective unconscious could be defined as a series of timeless materials from the depths of the psyche (rites, dreams, fantasies, paintings, dances, myths, and poems), recurrent in all human cultures and aesthetics forms. Myths, for Jung, were conceived as daydreams, perennial messages from the unconscious revealing perdurable human needs, desires and problems within the broad context of phase of psychic growth and maturation. We could equate Cawelti's popular narratives with Jung's 'myth', but with a twist. Cawelti believes in the existence of a collective unconscious; but his collective unconscious is not ahistorical, but embedded in a particular culture and finding expression in popular narratives.

Cawelti's study of culture and popular narratives also resembles Peter Brooks' study of the interrelationship between popular narratives and desire. He writes, "Narratives both tell of desire - typically present some story of desire - and make use of desire as dynamic of signification." (Peter Brooks, *Reading for Plot. Design and Intention in Narrative* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984) 37). In Brooks' account, narratives are spaces in which the desires - including taste and beliefs - of the people who read them are inscribed. So texts emerge as expressions of people's desires.

4. Popular narratives assimilate the changes in values in the community. This transition between old and new meanings is the major form of formula transformation and development. If new elements are introduced into the formula, the formula is renewed; if there is a strong departure from the previous formula, a new formula may result.

The interplay popular narratives / culture, however, cannot be solely reduced to an equation popular narratives / expression of the dreams and concerns of a specific community. Literature has traditionally been viewed as an arena where ideologies (particularly the hegemonic ideology of the group in power) are supported or opposed.<sup>65</sup> Popular narratives, being a form of literature, are thus involved in the dichotomy ideology / literature. Now, the conundrum literary critics try to come to terms with when faced with the relationship between ideology and popular narratives is whether popular narratives embody traditions of resistance to the dominant culture or are merely a means of domination and control. As Stuart Hall wonders: “containment or resistance?”<sup>66</sup> Some critics such as Q.D. Leavis and Richard Hoggart have attempted to redefine Literature and the popular in terms of their relation to ideology and ideological assumptions. And the outcome of this debate, Jane Radford explains,<sup>67</sup> has been a tendency by Left critiques (whether Luckácsian, Frankfurt or Althusserian) to regard Literature as operating transformatively on ideology,

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<sup>65</sup> Hegemonic ideology can be defined as a way of thinking associated with a historical moment and legitimated by its ruling institutions. Some scholars prefer to call the same concept ‘dominant discourse’ and insist that a distinction should be drawn between the two. However, Jackie Stacey and Lynne Pearce find the two concepts interchangeable: “it would be fair to say that for most of us the choice is simply indicative of our present theoretical affiliation: Marxist or Foucauldian.” The difference between the two terms is simply connotative for ‘ideology’ has a pejorative inference absent in discourse; it “signals the existence (somewhere) of a world uncontaminated by ideological *misrepresentations*.” Ideology still carries with it “a sense of ‘false consciousness’ (a way of thinking to be destroyed / rejected).” See: Jackie Stacey and Lynne Pearce, “The Heart of the Matter. Feminists Revisit Romance,” *Romance Revisited*, ed. Lynne Pearce and Jackie Stacey (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1995) 28. Following Pearce and Stacey, I use both discourse and ideology in my dissertation to mean a dominant way of thinking sanctioned by the established powers and that is challenged by oppositional forces - understood as groups such as gay men and lesbians, feminists, people of colour and white malcontents who find it difficult, not to say oppressive, to live up to the prospects and parameters imposed by orthodox, institutionalised, hegemonic power.

<sup>66</sup> Stuart Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing the Popular,” *People’s History and Socialist Theory*, ed. Raphael Samuel (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981) 228.

<sup>67</sup> Jane Radford, introduction, *The Progress of Romance*, ed. Jane Radford, 5-8.

“producing a ‘knowledge’ of it,”<sup>68</sup> whereas popular fiction merely reproduces and transmits ideology. So genres emerge as social strategies for they have a specific social function to perform as the expression of conservative ideological discourses. By means of this distinction they tend to corroborate the classifications formed in traditional literary criticism:

[...] the same body of canonised texts are approved, but for different reasons, and the rest - lumped together as a residue - disapproved.<sup>69</sup>

It does not make sense, however, to disapprove of popular fiction simply in terms of its support of dominant ideologies, and forget about the artistry which has been invested in its production; to reduce the quality of a text to its relation to ideology and to claim that its value is to be found in the capacity to operate transformatively in ideology. We cannot even establish, as a rule, that support of dominant ideology is a distinctive trait of popular fiction in general. We live in a market economy and popular literature, as a product, tends to become a vehicle for the hegemonic ideology, endorsing the values of the masses in order to sell, so we cannot deny that the market economy has major implications in the production of popular fiction. But this is as true for literature as ‘art’ as it is for the popular art forms. Furthermore, selling a product may involve expressing some sort of resistance to hegemonic practices. As Hans Robert Jauss established, there is a distance between the horizon of expectations and the work, between the familiarity of previous aesthetic experience and the horizontal change demanded by the reception of a literary work; so the writer can decide to stick to conventions and try to supply the reader with the expectations s/he has for the work, or, instead, he can decide to shock the reader and fail to fulfil these expectations. And, sometimes, shocking the readers, supplying them with new unconventional ideas, for instance, is an invaluable asset to the literary work and will grant it best-seller status. Some texts, on the other hand, encode conflicting discourses so oppositional or marginalised voices might be heard. There are some texts that present a resolution of the conflict in which the oppositional voice is shown to be invalid, incorrect or unnatural. But some others are not so literal in the resolution

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<sup>68</sup> Jane Radford, introduction, *The Progress of Romance*, ed. Jane Radford, 6.

<sup>69</sup> Jane Radford, introduction, *The Progress of Romance*, ed. Jane Radford, 6.

of the struggle and integrate what De Lauretis calls 'a view from elsewhere', elsewhere being defined as "the spaces in the margins of hegemonic discourse, social spaces carved in the interstices of institutions and in the chinks and the cranks of the power knowledge apparatus."<sup>70</sup> Popular narratives, like all art, can and do sometimes integrate these 'views from elsewhere', some (conspicuously the gothic or generic forms that develop a feminist discourse) turn oppositional discourses into integral parts of their narrative in order to reveal the disordered psychic or social landscape of an age characterised by social upheaval, or to set the moral 'wholeness' of the times in doubt.

Having said that, we cannot ignore the fact that popular fiction, like any other kind of fiction, may have an ideological content and, because of its sheer capacity to reach a vast number of readers, has a great potential for ideological reinforcement. As David Maughan-Brown writes:

With popular fiction, as with any other fiction, the confirmation of myths and stereotypes, the shoring-up of ideologically constructed world-views, the vindication of prejudices, are all part of the ideological baggage which is carried in, often unnoticed on the backs of characterisation and, in particular, plot.<sup>71</sup>

So the unpacking of ideological baggage is essential when dealing with popular fiction writers, like Wilbur Smith, who, by their sheer popularity, become the interpreters and reporters for the particular society they belong to or write about to the rest of the world. In fact, the ideological content of Wilbur Smith's novels (using his Courtney saga as a case study) is the main object of analysis in my dissertation, together with the representational strategies Smith makes use of in order to reinforce his ideological slant, which I identify as masculinist and white-supremacist pro-colonial.

The ideological content of Smith's novels, it is my thesis, is drawn from at least three closely related sources. On the one hand, we have to take into account the literary tradition, the genre, in which his narratives are embedded: adventure, and more particularly the imperialist adventure formula developed during the nineteenth

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<sup>70</sup> qtd. in Anne Cranny-Francis, *Feminist Fiction*, 21.

<sup>71</sup> David Maughan-Brown, "Raising Goose-Pimples: Wilbur Smith and the Politics of *Rage*," *Rendering Things Visible*, ed. Martin Trump (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1990) 135.

century by writers such as Henty, Kipling, Haggard, Stevenson or Buchan, which I analyse in this part of the dissertation. As an exponent of (imperialist) adventure, Smith not only makes use of the conventions that characterise this genre, but perpetuates its ideological slant, which he integrates into his narratives. Secondly, Smith's ideological bias cannot be properly interpreted without analysing his narratives against the macro-context of a western climate of a 'crisis of masculinity' which both determines and explicates Smith's particular approach to masculinity; this is analysed in the second part of my dissertation. Finally, the ideological content of Smith's novels under analysis cannot be understood outside the socio-cultural background of the complex South African reality in which his novels are produced, and which he uses as a backdrop against which his Courtney heroes perform their deeds of probity and gallantry. Smith cannot escape the racist underpinnings that so determine South Africa's social / historical / political panorama, which directly conditions the representation of both his white and his black men; this is analysed in the third part of the dissertation.

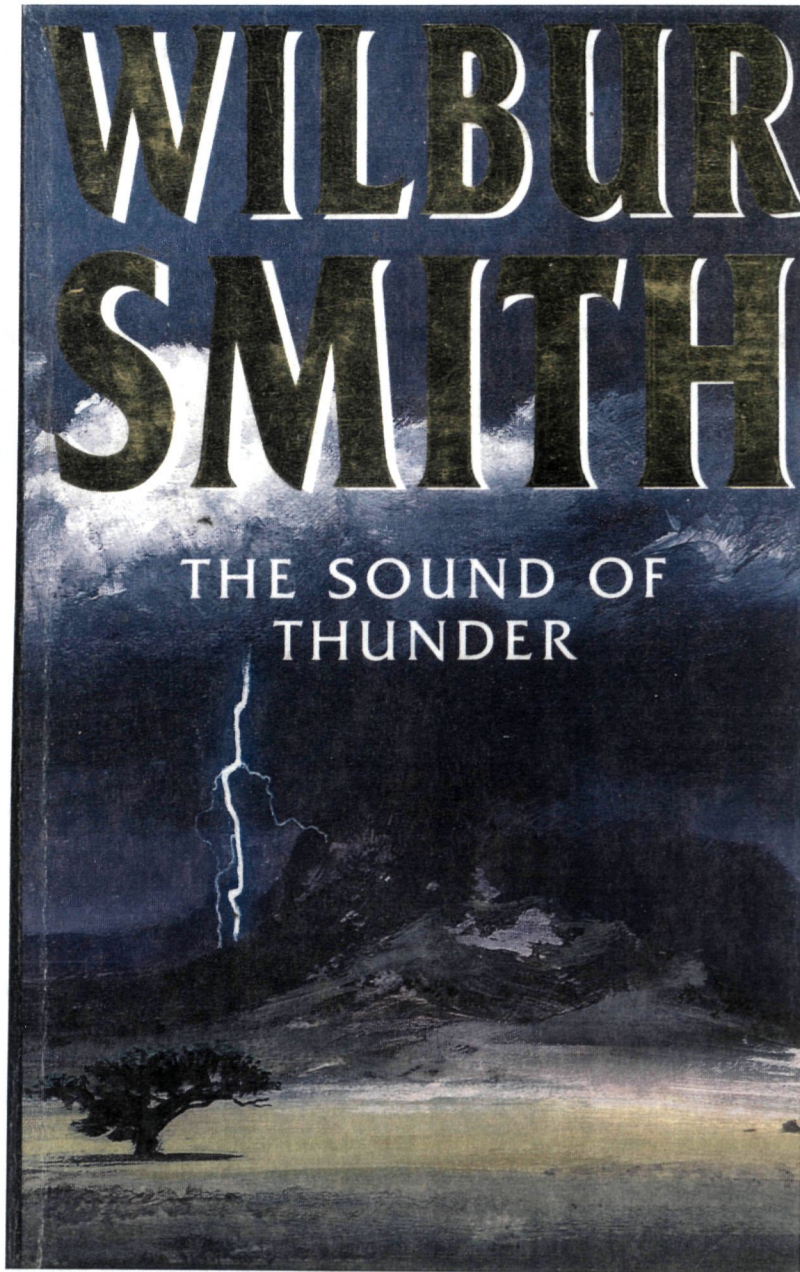


Figure 3. Cover for Wilbur Smith's *The Sound of Thunder* (London: Mandarin, 1992). Illustration by John Harris.

## **Chapter 2: A problematic framework. Smith and the adventure tradition**

### **2.1. Introductory remarks**

As I have explained in the previous chapter, one of the aspects that most characterises popular narratives is the fact that they can be classified into different systems (what Neale calls 'genre' and Cawelti 'formula') from which they derive part of their meaning and which pre-determine the characteristics of each of the single examples belonging to that system. Instances of narratives belonging to one system will share an underlying story pattern and certain combinations of cultural materials. Knowledge of the system a specific popular novel belongs to helps us to reach a better understanding of the narrative since its meaning is not only derived from the interaction author / reader / culture, but also from the interplay with other narratives belonging to the same system.<sup>1</sup>

The Wilbur Smith novels under analysis (*When the Lion Feeds, The Sound of Thunder, A Sparrow Falls, The Burning Shore, Power of the Sword, Rage, A Time to Die, Golden Fox, Birds of Prey and Monsoon*), being examples of popular narrative, can also be grouped within a particular system or genre which I identify as the imperialist adventure tale or story developed in nineteenth-century England, and which by the 1880s had reached a large and enthusiastic adult readership. The relevance and quality of imperialist adventure fiction was vigorously defended by critics such as Andrew Lang, who regarded it as the highest class of fiction. Such writing, he believed, was much more in tune with the physical and sexual elements of human life. He praised it for activating an instinctive pleasure in idealistic stories that led us on breathtaking expeditions that were almost beyond belief. In making his point, Lang was defending the virtues of adventure against what he felt were the vices

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<sup>1</sup> We will, for example, reach a better understanding of a particular detective novel if we are familiar with the detective formula, since it is the formula that provides us with what we can expect to find in the novel.

of an altogether different form of fiction that had been gaining increasing attention in the final quarter of the nineteenth century, classed under the labels of naturalism and realism, and which can be fairly represented by the influential works of George Eliot and Émile Zola. Lang believed those realist and naturalist works, which concentrated on what were regarded as disrespectable and degenerate themes (prostitution, adultery, and other morally reprehensible behaviour), had debilitating effects on the human psyche.

As the nineteenth century drew to its close, the generic features of imperialist adventure writing were put under critical scrutiny. Despite the high claims of Lang and his associates for the distinctive quality of adventure writing, they could not convince educationalists and intellectuals that this type of romance was on a par with those written in a realist vein. After the 1880s the adventure story was not seen as an entirely fit subject for further critical consideration. Stories of this kind were considered simply too popular, arousing pleasures that were regarded as too naive and uncomplicated. Mass appeal had much to do with low critical valuation, but there are other factors that contributed to late Victorian adventure passing out of the respected canons of English literature. First of all, "such writing was dismissed because it frequently found favour with a juvenile readership, and thus it was thought not to have value for an intellectually engaged adult mind."<sup>2</sup> And secondly, adventure was condemned for its political inflection. From the beginning of the twentieth century, when Joseph Conrad deconstructed the imperial subject in narratives such as *Almayer's Folly* or *Heart of Darkness*, but especially in our modern times and our postcolonial context, the imperialist overtones and extreme jingoism of adventure have been found far from palatable. The politics of adventure, therefore, have contributed to the indictment of this form of fiction.

But in spite of the ideological slant of these often ferocious tales of seafaring, tracking, and exploration that shot to fame in the 1850s; in spite of the continuous attacks by their fervent detractors; the appeal of adventure did not peter out.

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<sup>2</sup> Joseph Bristow, introduction, *The Oxford Book of Adventure Stories*, ed. Joseph Bristow (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) xv.



'Conducted' through the 'wires' of the influential *Boys' Own Paper*, comics, adventure narratives, and, more recently, action-packed films, adventure has survived into the twentieth century. And Wilbur Smith has drunk from the tradition of imperialist adventure fiction and brought it to its full swell to present a white supremacist vision of South Africa. The wider story-plot underlying Wilbur Smith's novels is 'adventure', or what Northrop Frye calls 'Romance'.<sup>3</sup> An understanding of both adventure as a genre and the inflections of the imperialist adventure tradition, therefore, will help us better understand Wilbur Smith's works. Consequently, I find it important to delve into the characteristics of these two areas in my dissertation.

However, before undertaking this analysis, I want to make three introductory comments. To start with, although Smith retains most of the constitutive elements of the imperialist adventure tradition, and as I stress throughout my dissertation, he uses them for his own purposes. The icons of imperialist adventure, as well as its ideological slant, are integral parts of Smith's fiction. Yet, Smith, unlike British imperialist writers, is not concerned with the defence of the British empire, which has long since disintegrated as a result of widespread postcolonial trends. His main aims in the narrative, it seems to me, are, first, to defend the rights of British white settlers in South Africa, which Smith regards as the country of their birthright; and, above all, to perpetuate and magnify the masculinist discourse of imperialist adventure in order to ratify man's power and hegemonic rule in times characterised by a supposed crisis of traditional masculinity.

Secondly, although I find Smith's narratives are embedded in the imperialist adventure tradition, they cannot be encapsulated into a single compartment. Not even critics agree on the 'genre' of the novels, which have been variously called: 'masculinist romances', 'epic adventure', 'romantic adventure' or 'adventure thriller', to mention just a few. Wilbur Smith himself is reluctant to accept classifications of his novels, and when asked about Cawelti and whether he writes to a formula, he gave me the following answer:

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<sup>3</sup> Northrop Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism*, 186-206.

I have not heard of Cawelti but I do not agree with him. If you look at my own humble efforts and take books such as *River God*, *Eagle in the Sky* and *When the Lion Feeds*, I would challenge you to detect any formula that is common to all three.<sup>4</sup>

Wilbur Smith's 'formula' contains different ingredients (elements from romance, western, thriller, melodrama and family saga appear in his novels) that cannot be disregarded. Smith, in fact, deftly utilises elements belonging to different genres to serve his own interests (for instance, he uses elements of romance to secure women within acceptable patriarchal gender-role expectations; he also resorts to historical novel characteristics to present his own version of South African history). However, the analysis of other constitutive elements is beyond the scope of this project. My interest lies in imperialist adventure since this is the genre that best defines Smith's production and his ideological slant;<sup>5</sup> other generic conventions will be analysed only when the necessity arises.

And thirdly, I want to state that my only aim in this and the chapters that follow in this part of the dissertation is to analyse the characteristics of adventure in general and imperialist adventure in particular, starting by dealing with the problems affecting adventure, which I develop in this chapter. If I devote time and space to these aspects, it is because they help situate Smith within a generic tradition and as an exponent of imperialist adventure writing. My main objective in my dissertation is to disclose Smiths' masculinist (as well as white-supremacist) ideology and reach conclusions on the reasons that account for Smith's discourse. Part of this discourse, I defend in chapter 5, is determined by the tradition in which Smith drinks to write his novels. The other two aspects that determine his masculinist slant are analysed in the

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<sup>4</sup> Isabel Santaulària, "Lost Among the Stars' Uncoded Messages. In Conversation with Wilbur Smith," *Multi-Cultural Voices*, ed. Brian Worsfold, 114.

<sup>5</sup> Elements belonging to other formulas appear in Smith's narratives, but, contrary to what happens with imperialist adventure, other formulas are only tangentially used. If we take the *When the Lion Feeds*, for example, we can see that Smith uses elements that belong to the western formula: the setting is a geographical topography where there is a conflict between an advancing civilisation on one side and a savage wilderness on the other; there is a group of people who stand for the whole complex values associated with civilisation; there are the villains that are characterised by their perversion or rejection of the values; and there is the hero, whose part is that of the man in the middle. But even though these ingredients of the formula appear in this particular novel, we do not have Indians, cowboys, pioneers, the code of the West, and others. Elements of romance, on the other hand, are pervasive throughout the saga. Yet, romance is just a secondary interest for the heroes; women are just prizes or rewards and are denied a voice with which to narrate their experiences.

other two parts of my dissertation. I do not attempt to analyse Smith's novels from a structuralist point of view. If I undertake to explain the characteristics of adventure and imperialist adventure, it is only because they provide a context that sheds light on Smith's oeuvre. It is basically in the two last parts of my dissertation that I analyse Smith's works, looking at how he represents men, women and black men as a response to a particular social climate and, of course, perpetuating the tradition of 'adventure and imperialist adventure outlined here. Having made these clarifications, I follow by outlining the 'problems' surrounding adventure, 'problems' that are intended to reflect the framework of prejudice and misunderstanding which anyone interested in the serious study of adventure has to face.

## **2.2. The problems of adventure**

Adventure has not fared well in the realm of fiction, at least not as far as critical acclaim or prestige are concerned. There has always been a great deal of adventure writing and reading. The works by authors of adventure have been vastly and universally enjoyed by generations of children and adults who have found in the tapestries these writers weave an opportunity for indulging their imagination and revelling in experiences they have been denied in flesh. The list of authors who have cultivated this genre is one of quasi-infinite dimensions, ranging from the 'ancients' Homer and Jenofonte; through the *littérateurs* whose oeuvres orchestrated the birth and development of the (western) modern world system and saw it to its demise (such as Daniel Defoe, Sir Walter Scott, Théophile Gautier, Alexandre Dumas, Jules Verne, Frederick Marryat, Anthony Hope Hawkins, Robert Louis Stevenson, H. Rider Haggard, Joseph Conrad, J.M. Barrie, Arthur Conan Doyle, Rudyard Kipling, H.G. Wells, James Fenimore Cooper, Herman Melville, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Johnston McCulley, Emilio Salgari, Rafael Sabatini, Ramón del Valle Inclán, Pío Baroja or José Mallorquí Figuerola); to their contemporary descendants, who have resuscitated the genre in its classical form and adapted it to the demands of a new generation of readers eager for hearty excitement (Wilbur Smith, Patrick O'Brian, Ken Follett and

Bernard Cornwell, for instance, are examples of adventure writers who enjoy best-seller status).<sup>6</sup>

Likewise, cinema screens are - and, I would even venture, have always been - rife with adventure films featuring heroes overcoming all sorts of apparently unsurpassable obstacles, digging up treasures of yore, meeting formidable challenges, rescuing damsels in distress, ridding commoners of the yoke of unbearable oppression, or undertaking perilous journeys beyond the limits of our industrial civilisations into exotic, unexplored and colourful locales. The success enjoyed by recent adventure productions gives ample proof of the vitality of the genre in its cinematic form. *The Man in the Iron Mask* and *The Mask of Zorro*,<sup>7</sup> to mention just two of the newest and most popular adventure releases of the late 1990s, are part of a tradition of adventure film-making which started with the invention of the cinema at the beginning of the century, and which has furnished audiences world-wide with an enormous array of 'favourite classics'. Among these, I could mention: *The Thief of Baghdad*, *Tarzan*, *the Ape Man*, *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, *Captain Blood*, *The Four Feathers*, *The Black Swan*, *King Solomon's Mines*, *The Flame and the Arrow*, *The Prisoner of Zenda*, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, *The Naked Jungle*, *Hatari!*, *The Man Who Would Be King*, and, more recently, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, and the other two *Indiana Jones* sequels that make up the trilogy, or *Romancing the Stone* - most of them literary adaptations and / or the object of constant remakes and continuations. Adventure, furthermore, has grown and evolved, changing with the times, assimilating technology and exploring the adventurous possibilities of modern city-scapes (aptly called asphalt jungles) in what I regard as the contemporary development of adventure, action, in films such as the *Die Hard* and the *Lethal Weapon* series.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> In the Spanish-speaking world, Alberto Vázquez Figueroa is a present-day exponent of adventure writing. It seems that Arturo Pérez-Reverte has also turned to adventure of late.

<sup>7</sup> Some would probably argue that the success these films have enjoyed is mostly due to the popularity and / or sex-appeal of their leading actors Leonardo DiCaprio and Antonio Banderas, and would probably support the argument by brandishing the fact that other adventure productions such as the 1993 version of *The Three Musketeers* were unquestionable blunders. The appeal of adventure has always been linked with the lure of the adventure hero, and being able to choose an appropriate star to embody the adventurous persona with whom one readily identifies should not be regarded as detrimental to the genre, but one of the genre's most valuable assets in its cinematic form.

<sup>8</sup> Action is by no means the same of adventure. Yet, the action genre retains some of the most relevant constitutive elements of adventure, namely, powerful heroic figures performing deeds of derring-do against the wild landscapes of contemporary cities and freeing the world of villainous characters with the

In spite of the genre's undeniable popularity, box-office success and best-selling status, to the extent that it can be regarded as one of the most important arts, adventure, together with other categories such as romance and crime or detective fiction, has been relegated to an unvisited periphery of the canon on the edge of literary respectability.<sup>9</sup> Literary pundits have denied adventure the status of high art, on the grounds that popularity equals lack of quality, and have, consequently, refused the genre "[their] stamps of approval, [their] prestige-conferring nomenclature, such as 'sonnet', 'satire', or 'prose poem', names which - like a password - give books access to a privileged zone of transcendent being where a protocol of respectful reading obtains."<sup>10</sup> Police action by men of letters has certainly been effective in turning adventure into a kind of market labelling, telling the reader what he or she is buying but denying that the book has any other value. The consequences of this continual deprivileging of adventure have been many indeed.

In the first place, adventure has been systematically excluded from the canon and the literary curricula. We can find adventure in publishers' lists of young-adult reading in what are called 'classics' or, even more confusing, 'popular classics'. There you find Scott, Dumas, Kipling, Haggard, even Zane Grey, side by side with Austen, Eliot, the Brontë's or Joyce. But when young people begin to study literature at university level, they are likely to be taught to draw a sharp distinction between the two, between literature and entertainment. Literary scholars or critics decide which writers are 'serious', which ones belong in the canon, which ones deserve to be taught and studied; and adventure stories are not considered to be art, not taken seriously (even when written by men of extraordinary talent and dedication such as Kipling and

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application of their physical probity and fighting skills. Consequently, action can be regarded as a descendant of the adventure genre, one that takes place in the city and is less epic in its scope.

<sup>9</sup> The same statement could be applied to adventure cinema. Film studies at university seem to revolve around acknowledged classics and only tangentially concentrate on adventure or other popular genres. Box-office success and the application of successful formulas to new cinematic productions are of course the object of study, after all audiences have to be petted and provided with elements that have proved prevailing and repeatedly enjoyable, which is something no cinema connoisseur can disregard. Most often, however, popular genres are bundled together and studied as a whole, seldom focusing on the idiosyncrasies that characterise each of the genres. Furthermore, they are dealt with indulgently, treating audiences as naive and uncultivated recipients of ready-made patterns they consume in spite of their lack of quality.

<sup>10</sup> Martin Green, *Seven Types of Adventure Tale*, 27.

Haggard). As a consequence, demarcation lines and barriers of control have been erected around adventure, turning it into a kind of literary ghetto containing some of the dregs of literary production and, because of their pernicious potential, the object of perpetual amnesia.

Some scholars, on the other hand, have found ways to incorporate adventure into high culture worthy of respectable attention. Green<sup>11</sup> mentions three: firstly, by focusing on non-fiction adventure. Much of adventure writing is certainly non-fiction (biography, sailing / climbing / diving narrative, explorer books, descriptions of revolutions, battles and guerrilla warfare). When contemporary and far off in space, this is journalism; when far off in time, this is history. This is adventure reading without being called adventure, and “it forms a large part of the intellectual diet of men of power and action without being called adventure.”<sup>12</sup> Secondly, a large section of adventure fiction is labelled historical fiction, regarded as history, and, thus, as informational: as a way of learning about past historical events. And thirdly, by considering adventure ‘boys’ reading’, suitable for children since they contain the myths that shape their imagination and orient their drives, but not for adults, who are supposed to direct their appetites to more ‘respectable dishes’. In these ways, adventure elements, though obvious, are conceptually masked and conceded acceptance by scholars, even if this implies tacit assent to adventure’s lack of literary quality.

A second consequence of critics and scholars’ condemnation of adventure is the often biased or partial study of celebrated literary figures who include elements of adventure in their works. Writers such as Homer, Virgil, Shakespeare and Milton enjoy unquestionable literary prestige for they are supposed to speak of the universal truths of the human soul and are characterised by sublimity and aesthetic value. And yet, in their works, these writers offer narrative pronouncements on the history and destiny of their societies made in the name of the participants of that destiny, and they help to shape national conscience by the use of passages of danger, escape,

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<sup>11</sup> Martin Green, *Seven Types of Adventure Tale*, 37-39.

<sup>12</sup> Martin Green, *Seven Types of Adventure Tale*, 38.

excitement, war and triumph (all of which constitutive elements of adventure). However, these elements are seldom highlighted in the lecture room for they would force scholars to come to terms with the killing and fighting that has always accompanied the advance of civilisation. These elements, on the other hand, are systematically highlighted in the works of authors such as Kipling, Haggard and Defoe, and used as an excuse to exile these writers from university English departments.

There is still another reason that accounts for the systematic silencing of the adventure elements in the authors granted acceptance in 'the great tradition'. For some reason, English departments concentrate on authors who dissent from their society. In the interpretations of their works, it is difference, or what Harold Bloom terms strangeness or originality, that is accentuated:

One mark of an originality that can win canonical status of a literary work is a strangeness that we either never altogether assimilate, or that becomes such a given that we are blinded to its idiosyncrasies. [...] the tang of originality must always hover in an inaugural aspect of any work that incontestably wins the agon with tradition and joins the canon.<sup>13</sup>

Great authors, it is assumed, shake people out of their lethargic acceptance of standardised assumptions, whether social, political, aesthetic or otherwise. Harold Bloom proceeds:

The West's greatest writers are subversive of all values, both ours and their own. [...] If we read the Western Canon in order to form our social, political, or personal moral values, I firmly believe, we will become monsters of selfishness and exploitation. To read in the service of any ideology is not, in my judgement, to read at all.<sup>14</sup>

Even Jane Austen's novels, for so long acknowledged exponents of 'the great tradition', have been criticised for the elements of social assent and reinforcement, to the extent that they have been graded according to their opposition or acceptance of established early nineteenth-century social mores. The success of *Pride and Prejudice*,

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<sup>13</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon*, 4-5.

<sup>14</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon*, 29.

therefore, has been accounted for, Marilyn Butler defends,<sup>15</sup> not only by its breadth and spirit, but by the protagonist's, Elizabeth Bennet, wit and satirical vision, capable of exposing the ills of contemporary high-society and church. Given these premises, it is easy to see why critics have either disregarded or camouflaged the adventurous elements in canonical works. The analysis of these elements would disclose these works' assertive pronouncements on the history and destiny of their societies, their ideological and social aims which have been consistently neglected in favour of their aesthetic strength, mastery of figurative language, originality, cognitive power, knowledge, exuberance of diction, and the depth with which they handle universal concerns such as mortality, change and death.

The disparaging of adventure has had another effect. Since the genre has been the object of continued attack, the champions of adventure themselves have gradually accepted and assimilated their inferior status. More than often, they have assumed an apologetic tone, feeling that they have to ask for forgiveness for the genre they have chosen as their literary tool and that they have to excuse the shapeless diction and poor literary quality of their works ... after all, they are *only* writing adventure, a disreputable genre that does not require the elaborate language and careful plotting and characterisation honourable genres deserve. In *King Solomon's Mines*, for example, Haggard tries to cover his back by making Alan Quatermain the narrator of the story, a man of action who cannot master the art of writing and who consequently apologises for his writing style - or lack of it!:

And now it only remains for me to offer my apologies for my blunt way of writing. I can only say in excuse for it that I am more accustomed to handle a rifle than a pen, and cannot make any pretence to the grand literary flourishes which I see in novels - for I sometimes read a novel. I suppose they - the flights and flourishes - are desirable, and I regret not being able to supply them; but at the same time I cannot help thinking that simple things are always the most impressive, and books are easier to understand when they are written in plain language, though I have perhaps no right to set up an opinion on such a matter. "A sharp spear," runs the Kukuana saying, "needs no polish;" and on the same principle I venture to hope that a true story, however strange it may be, does not require to be decked out in fine words.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Marilyn Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (London: Clarendon Press, 1987).

<sup>16</sup> H. Rider Haggard, *King Solomon's Mines* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1989) 6.



Similarly, in *She* Haggard assumes the identity of the editor of the story, whose only responsibility towards the narration is that of bringing it to light and not towards the nature or the quality of what he is about to disclose:

In giving to the world the record of what, looked at as an adventure only, is I suppose one of the most wonderful and mysterious experiences ever undergone by mortal men, I feel it is incumbent on me to explain my exact connection with it. And so I may as well say at once that I am not the narrator but only the editor of this extraordinary history, and then go on to tell how it found its way into my hands.<sup>17</sup>

Melville, to mention just another example, who was first published as a writer of sea-and-island adventures, also internalised the negative connotations of adventure although he experienced the burden of being an adventure writer differently from Haggard. Apparently he felt all too keenly the split between adventure and literature, and resisted the role forced on him as an adventure writer for he had to stick to conventions that he found repugnant and which, Green explains,<sup>18</sup> brought about spiritual rebellion and moral conflict in the author. In *Typee*, for instance, Melville writes within the thematic parameters of adventure. The hero, a sailor of aristocratic origin, abandons his ship to live with a Polynesian tribe on the island of Nukuheva, a sort of frontier where the values of civilisation are not yet fully established. He represents white civilisation and studies the Typee culture, which, characterised by happiness, pleasure and relaxation, he comes to prefer to his own - represented by the military and missionary settlements, both of them destructive. However, Melville is forced to bring the narrative line and the thematic message to conformity, which he does by dwelling at length on the natives' cannibalism, the ultimate sanction of white imperialism, and the hero's attempts to escape and return to his homeland. Eventually, he fulfils the expectations generated by adventure.

Authors of adventure themselves, therefore, have internalised the split literature / adventure, assuming they are not writing literature, but merely catering for the demands of a non-literary, uncultivated readership. The effects of this implicit genuflection at the altar of Great Literature, to the detriment of adventure - a

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<sup>17</sup> H. Rider Haggard, *She* (London: Penguin Popular Classics, 1994) 9.

<sup>18</sup> Martin Green, *Seven Types of Adventure Tale*, 114-115.

heathenish practice to be despised - has had two different effects. Firstly, some authors have subscribed to the idea that quality is inappropriate for books in that genre and have cultivated it accordingly, which has resulted in the production of a large number of poor quality adventure books. In this way, adventure writers are nonchalantly perpetuating the selfsame stigmata critics and scholars have inflicted upon them. And secondly, adventure writers themselves have become belligerent critics of the ills of adventure and its values and ideals in their adventure works.

Writers in general have tended to regard adventurous topics with suspicion; even the exacerbated Romantics, who have been credited with being one of the direct sources of adventure and the adventurous mood at the end of the eighteenth century beginning of the nineteenth, withdraw from adventure in their works. Wordsworth, for instance, wrote about himself as being in love with violent adventure as a boy in "Home at Grasmere:"

While yet an innocent little one, with a heart  
That doubtless wanted not its tender moods,  
I breathed (for this I better recollect)  
Among wild appetites and blind desires,  
Motions of savage instinct my delight  
And exaltation.  
Nothing at that time  
So welcome, no temptation half so dear  
As that which urged me to a daring feat,  
Deep pools, tall trees, black chasm and dizzy crags,  
And tottering towers: I loved to stand and read  
Their looks forbidding, read and disobey,  
Sometimes in act, and evermore in thought.

As the poem advances, however, we can see Wordsworth becoming gradually weary of his exaltation of adventure. He proceeds to bid farewell to the adventurous mood and to abide by more honourable, 'unadventurous' qualities, mildness and reason:

That which is stealth by Nature was performed  
Hath reason sanctioned; her deliberate Voice  
Hath said; be mild, and cleave to gentle things,  
Thy glory and thy happiness be there ...  
[...]  
Then farewell to the Warrior's Schemes, farewell  
The forwardness of soul which looks that way  
Upon a less incitement than the Cause

Of Liberty endangered, and farewell  
That other hope, long mine, the hope to fill  
The heroic trumpet with the Muse's breath.

External pressure against adventure, therefore, has been too strong to be disregarded by serious writers who were sympathetic towards adventure in the first place; and too strong to be disregarded even by the selfsame authors who wrote within the premises of the genre. Consequently, writers of adventure have assimilated and incorporated the accusations that scholars and critics have systematically brought against adventure. Haggard, for instance, disparages the imperial forces at whose service he wrote in *She*. In this novel, he highlights the might of the British empire, represented by Leo Vincey and Mr Holly's adventurous, conquering pose and superiority. At the same time, he joins the ranks of adventure, and by extension empire detractors by foregrounding the vulnerability of empires throughout the ages, systematically assigned to oblivion and doomed to irreversible demise:

Time after time have nations, ay, and rich and strong nations, learned in the arts, been and passed away to be forgotten, so that no memory of them remains. This is but one of several: for time eats up the works of man.<sup>19</sup>

Uneasiness about adventure can also be felt, for example, in recent cinematic adventure productions such as *Romancing the Stone* and its sequel, *The Jewel of the Nile*, in which the directors tacitly accept censure and attempt self-satire, blending adventure with humour to demythologise the adventurous premises of magnificent locations, impossible feats and neck-breaking action (to the detriment of characterisation) that Steven Spielberg so successfully and unashamedly exploited in his *Indiana Jones* trilogy.

More often, however, criticism has not only been incorporated tangentially. Some writers have turned to adventure just to reverse and parody it, starting from an obvious adventure point of departure only to methodically deconstruct and demythologise it. Ironically, such attempts at capsizing adventure have been granted sustained literary prestige, supporting, in this way, scholars and critics' postulation

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<sup>19</sup> H. Rider Haggard, *She*, 176.

that literature begins with the denial of adventure. Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is often quoted as one of the literary works that successfully turned the adventurous tenets upside down to show the ills of white civilisation at its apparently most adventurous and triumphant. It is not the only one. Mark Twain scorned Cooper's concept of the noble red man and mocked the legend of Captain Cook in *Roughing It*; he also inverted the historical romance in *Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. In *The History of Mr Polly*, H.G. Wells followed Cervantes' path and painted a colourful picture of the addled mind of an ordinary clerk who disregarded edifying literature to drink "at the poisoned fountains of English literature [adventure], fountains [...] unsuited to the needs of a decent clerk"<sup>20</sup> and to imitate the characters depicted in these books, "homely, adventurous, drunken, incontinent and delightful."<sup>21</sup> The ethics of adventure, especially the Robinson Crusoe story, are also subverted in three French novels: Jean Giraudoux's *Suzanne et le Pacifique*, Jean Psichari's *Le Solitaire du Pacifique* and Michael Tournier's *Vendredi: ou Les Limbes du Pacifique*. Finally, and to mention another prestigious example, in *The Lord of the Flies*, William Golding starts from an adventurous premise, showing us another group of British schoolboys marooned on a desert island without supervision and challenged to show themselves true adventurers; but in his version of Ballantyne's *Coral Island*, the boys revert to savagery and murder in what becomes one of the crudest exposés of adventure: a fable of disillusion in which none of the adventurous values (leadership, common sense and practicality) proves useful to defeat an evil nature that only civilisation, feeble as it is, can redeem. When an officer in naval whites comes to the rescue, he utters the following statement, "I should have thought that a pack of British boys - you're all British, aren't you? - would have been able to put up a better show than that."<sup>22</sup> Nothing remains to be said after that. The condemnation of the ethos of adventure is complete.

It is not that adventure does not deserve condemnation. It probably does, especially if we approach the genre, and particularly its politics, from a conscientious post-imperialist or post-feminist perspective. In an era that has witnessed the horrors

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<sup>20</sup> H.G. Wells, *The History of Mr Polly* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960) 80.

<sup>21</sup> H.G. Wells, *The History of Mr Polly*, 128.

<sup>22</sup> William Golding, *The Lord of the Flies* (New York, 1960) 184.

of two world wars and when hair-raising accounts of armed conflicts, riots, wife-battering and other forms of violence feature prominently in the daily news, we have grown to regard violence with disgust and utter revulsion. And yet, violence is gratuitously indulged in in adventure which often provides graphic accounts of immense quantities of bloodshed. In an era that has witnessed the end of the British empire and when other forms of imperialism, neo-colonialism and interventionism, no matter how sugar-coated by a layer of altruistic motivation, are the object of growing concern and disapproval, we cannot but reel away in shock at the self-congratulatory tones with which adventure engages in military and colonial exploits and supports the ruthless authority that was often the result of imperial domination. In a period when the historical burden of race-thinking is being undermined by postcolonial critics and men and women of colours other-than-white, the effortless assumptions of white superiority found in adventure cannot but cause offence. In an era when the feelings of exacerbated nationalism among the newly independent peoples such as the Irish or the Albanians are regarded as having a “near-pathological character, rooted in fear and hatred of the other,”<sup>23</sup> we cannot but disparage the role adventure tales served as “those acts of imagination and narration that constitute the imagined communities called nations.”<sup>24</sup> At a time when feminist movements have consistently defeated masculinist assumptions and attacked the systematic marginalisation of women from areas commonsensically held to be men’s only, we cannot but disapprove of the celebration of manliness and of the standardised presentation of women found in adventure, in which women are supposed to glow with goodness in the most self-sacrificing manner imaginable, and to remain close to the hearth-side, maintaining a sweet, pacifying and consolingly angelic pose if they are not to be excised from the narrative. And finally, at a time when the moral has come to be identified with the social and the domestic and their values (home, laws, control, monogamy, purity, work, restraint and the such) to the extent that staying within the limits of organic society has become the option of moral maturity, we cannot but condemn the celebration of the lawless hero in adventure, the indifference with which he contemplates the undertakings of the family man, and his expansionist and vital mood

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<sup>23</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983) 129.

<sup>24</sup> Martin Green, *Seven Types of Adventure Tale*, 7.

that makes him uninterested in the immortal soul and life after death which, by the way, so restrain the ordinary man and prevent him from engaging in adventurous pursuits.

The list of indictments against the policies of adventure is long indeed for retractors have found enough arguments in our present-day movements and philosophies to support the marginalisation of adventure, and to speak volumes of the intoxicant effects adventure may have on a tender, innocent mind. So much for the postcolonial or post-feminist mood. These disparagements of adventure are certainly well-founded for, as is often the case, it is very seldom that people undertake groundless attacks and in opposites there is also truth, or so the Buddhist maxim goes. These, to our modern tastes, unpalatable trends outlined above are part and parcel of adventure and will be the object of further analysis in the following sections. Yet, adventure, like other genres, should not be despised on ideological grounds only. There is much in adventure that deserves praise. It is not only that adventure is as valid as any other genre to help us understand ourselves, our society, and the assumptions and presumptions, dreams and desires, that have shaped and are still shaping our lives. There is much pleasure to be found in adventure if we come to accept that all the fights, massacres and incredible feats of courage (together with the policies they serve) are structural conventions that help the adventurous plot to hurtle from one heart-stopping moment to another. There is much pleasure to be found in the lure of being plunged into the marvellous, enthralling, and yet so often terrifying realms of the unknown.

If nothing else, adventure comes as a breath of fresh air in the midst of the asphyxiating accumulation of defeat and decay, the humanly meagre and meaningless, malignant environments of 'townscape', climate, culture and psyche, dullness and pathos, sinners and world-haters, anti-heroes and losers that feature in the literature of 'honourable' writers such as Dickens, Waugh, Eliot, Woolf or Lawrence. It is probably true that adventurous tales are wish-fulfilment dreams and, as such, serve the purpose drugs are supposed to serve: that of helping us escape from unpleasant situations rather than helping us face up to and overcome these unpleasant situations (ah, the old

Hamlet dilemma!). But even this assumption is questionable, especially if we take into account that dreams have often encouraged whole civilisations to make the dream come true no matter the price, rather than indulge in escapist defeatism. It is certainly true that adventures are fantasies for they rejoice in imagined feats of incredible prowess. And yet, even adventure-as-fantasy deserves no condemnation, especially, and as Green writes, “when one realises how much reality is defined by civilised consensus and how much of fact as well as feeling that excludes [to the extent that] one is tempted to call reality just the most brilliant of fantasies.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Martin Green, *Seven Types of Adventure Tale*, 194.

## Chapter 3: Adventure and its boundaries. Constitutive elements of adventure

### 3.1. The concept of adventure and its generic function

Adventure has been the object of critical scrutiny for some time now and enthusiasts of the genre have not only engaged in its defence against detractors, but have furnished library shelves with thorough and enlightening volumes on the nature and generic borders of adventure fiction. Joseph Bristow,<sup>1</sup> Martin Green,<sup>2</sup> Brian Taves,<sup>3</sup> John G. Cawelti,<sup>4</sup> José María Latorre<sup>5</sup> and Northrop Frye<sup>6</sup> are but just a few of such scholars. However, they all seem to have reached different conclusions on what adventure is and what examples it comprises.<sup>7</sup> Every single critic seems to defend a different corpus of adventure. In fact, the only single issue these critics seem to agree on is the confusion over what comprises the genre. The problems of adventure,

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<sup>1</sup> Studies of adventure by Joseph Bristow include the following: Joseph Bristow, introduction, *The Oxford Book of Adventure Stories*, ed. Joseph Bristow, which has already been mentioned in a previous note; and Joseph Bristow, *Empire Boys. Adventures in a Man's World* (London: Harper Collins Academic, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> Apart from the book: Martin Green, *Seven Types of Adventure Tale*, which I have already mentioned in previous notes, Martin Green's studies of adventure include: Martin Green, *Dreams of Adventure, Deeds of Empire* (London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980); Martin Green, *The Adventurous Male. Chapters in the History of the White Male Mind* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University Press, 1993); and Martin Green, *The Robinson Crusoe Story* (University Park and London: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> Brian Taves, *The Romance of Adventure. The Genre of Historical Adventure Movies* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> Although less prominent than is suggested in the title, Cawelti's *Adventure, Mystery and Romance* deals with adventure as a genre.

<sup>5</sup> José María Latorre, *La vuelta al mundo en ochenta aventuras* (Barcelona: Dirigido Por, 1995).

<sup>6</sup> A section on adventure is included in the book: Northrop Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism*, which I have already mentioned in previous notes.

<sup>7</sup> While Martin Green, for instance, includes some detective stories in adventure (such as the hard-boiled detective fiction written by John D. McDonald and Robert Parker), Brian Taves refuses to grant the film *Raiders of the Lost Ark* the status of adventure on the grounds that the use of the Old Testament magic of the Arc of the Covenant to defeat the dark powers of fascism defies the realist premises on which an adventurous plot has to be built. John G. Cawelti, on the other hand, and following Northrop Frye, tends to be all-inclusive, regarding adventure as a basic pattern of obstacles and consequent resolution which encompasses most of the other generic forms such as mystery and action; in contrast, José María Latorre is almost all-exclusive for he rejects adventure films such as *Mountains of the Moon* because it disregards the legendary and fantastic elements of adventure to focus on historical reality (whatever that means) or *Romancing the Stone* and *The Jewel of the Nile* for they use comedy and humour to mock the taken-for-grantedness of heroism and bravery in adventure.



therefore, are not just of attitude. I have already established that adventure has traditionally been disparaged by both *littérateurs* and critics who have attacked the genre on both aesthetic and moral grounds. The genre is also structurally tiresome, so hollow and 'shapeless' as to become a 'ghost category'.<sup>8</sup> The reasons that account for the hollowness of the genre, in my opinion, are three, which I proceed to outline.

To start with, the word adventure itself is difficult to define. Adventure has in fact become such a widespread term in our daily vocabulary as to become empty and uncomfortably mercurial. It has been indiscriminately applied to situations as diverse as the ordeals - big and small - undergone by the average holiday-maker; a housewife's battle against a reluctant toaster; a suburban worker's eventful journey back home; or an investment in financial shares or a lottery ticket. In short, it has been both deprived of an essential and untransferable identity and it has been integrated into our everyday routines, losing its chivalrous and romantic overtones on the way.<sup>9</sup> Secondly, what might be regarded as an adventurous experience in real life has not often been transferred to recognisable adventure films or books, which, on the other hand, have still been advertised as adventure.<sup>10</sup> And thirdly, adventure has been over-used to refer to genres that are better defined as crime, fantasy, thrillers, science-fiction or detective, to the extent that it has been turned into a shapeless 'clichéd

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<sup>8</sup> Take a walk around Dillons Bookstores, or any other major bookstore for that matter, and you will find sections on horror, romance (now it is called 'saga'), science-fiction or crime, but you will not find a section on adventure, probably because it is assumed adventure is an old-fashioned genre no one is interested in at present (a fact which the sales of books by Smith, O'Brian and Follett would contradict); but most probably this is due to the fact that it would be difficult to reach a consensus on what books the section should contain. The same applies to video-shops where you find adventure films classed into the category of action or thriller, which may have points in common with adventure but are certainly different genres altogether.

<sup>9</sup> Even writers themselves have traditionally used the term in different ways, which do not always correspond to the purposeful idea of adventure we may have nowadays. Authors such as Scott, Conan Doyle or Wells, for instance, have used the word adventure in their books, sometimes even in the titles of their books, to mean things as diverse 'the things that happened to' (such as in *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* by Conan Doyle), 'attempts to rescue marital honour' (such as in Scott's *The Betrothed*) and 'the pathos of attempting to overcome a big ordeal without success' (such as in Scott's *Pevekil of the Peak*).

<sup>10</sup> Two films, *The Dove* and *Titanic*, for instance, are cases in point for they result from adventurous situations and / or have been advertised as adventures, and yet the potential of their adventurous premises is disregarded and subordinated to other thematic patterns. *The Dove* deals with a teenager who sails around the world but subordinates this theme to the melodramatic tale of his difficulties falling in love. *Titanic* describes the experiences of a young lady, Rose, who manages to outlive the demise of the mighty and unsinkable R.M.S. Titanic, but focuses on drama to the detriment of adventure, highlighting the romantic relationship between Rose and her low-class lover, Jack, who dies saving Rose's life.

slogan' with which to entice prospective readers or cinema-goers eager for excitement, action and easy entertainment. As a consequence, people seem to be confused about what the genre really is. Brian Taves writes, "ask six different individuals - lay person, scholar, critic or filmmaker - to name the first adventure film that comes to mind and there will probably be a half-dozen widely divergent answers."<sup>11</sup> Taves follows, "the term has been so broadly used and misused that it has become encrusted with a multiplicity of meanings and preconceptions. [...] Adventure, whether as a literary or cinematic form or as a mode of experience, is usually painted in broad strokes, defined in a loose, general manner."<sup>12</sup> A typical definition which illustrates Taves' assertion is offered by Trentell White,<sup>13</sup> who equates fiction, diversion, escapism and adventure. He writes that practically all fiction is adventure, a voyage into the unknown or beyond the horizon, an attitude that Ian Campbell epitomises. In his book *Adventure in the Movies*,<sup>14</sup> Campbell explains that adventure is distributed in varying amounts throughout the cinema, so that all movies can be described as adventure, even the historical love story *Gone with the Wind* and the musical biography *The Glenn Miller Story*.

These approaches to adventure eliminate the genre from the literary and cinematic panorama at a single stroke, turning it into an element of all fiction, so implicitly rejecting the idea that adventure is a separate and identifiable entity with its own identity, origins and development. In my opinion, however, adventure is a distinctive genre; consequently, I believe it is essential to determine what comprises the genre, to analyse its tenets and to mark the borders between it and other forms with similar characteristics. A generic approach sheds light on each of the examples the genre contains, helping to explain the characteristics (point of view, setting, locales, icons, social milieu, costumes, dialogue, physical build-up of characters, character types, atmosphere, situations, themes, pivotal event, mood and purpose) of each single adventure novel / film, which are often dictated by the exigencies of the genre more than by the personal will of the author. This generic approach allows a comprehensive

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<sup>11</sup> Brian Taves, *The Romance of Adventure*, 3.

<sup>12</sup> Brian Taves, *The Romance of Adventure*, 4.

<sup>13</sup> Trentell White, *How to Write for a Living* (Boston: The Writer, 1947).

<sup>14</sup> Ian Campbell, *Adventure in the Movies* (New York: Crescent Books, 1978).

look at the range of adventure films and novels as an enduring form, revealing the background from which they emerged and the actual social and political significance of the themes they have developed.<sup>15</sup>

Within adventure, it is true, we can find different sub-categories or sub-genres established with reference to their formal or technical features such as major themes, characters, setting or iconography.<sup>16</sup> These categorisations should be regarded as a guide, rather than as a strait-jacket for different adventure stories may partake of various elements belonging to different sub-genres. This generic permeability is not unique to adventure. Genres have a historically visible character and alter their shape and boundaries in different historical moments; consequently, it is difficult to allocate particular examples within specific genres or sub-genres, which have a hybrid nature. Yet, there are underlying features that allow for 'dominant' genres to exist; and adventure is not an exception. It has elements that, although not unique to the genre, are systematically found in different adventure fictions in combination with other elements so as to form the 'adventure system', with its different constitutive aspects governed by 'combinatory rules'. The analysis of these elements is not only pertinent for understanding how the genre works, but also because it sheds light on the kind of pleasure the readers / viewers derive from adventure fiction, even on the kind of readers adventure is likely to appeal to.

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<sup>15</sup> As I have explained before, genres do not exist in a 'pure' and 'unpolluted' form. Consequently, adventure, like other genres, carries elements belonging to other generic forms. *She*, for instance, introduces some fantastic elements like a lost race that has survived intact in the midst of the African jungle, surrounded and protected by poisonous swamps; and an eternal queen, Ayesha, who has magically stopped the process of ageing. However, it remains an example of imperialist adventure, Holly and Leo, the protagonists, introduced as examples of the might and right of British citizens in the colonies and of the moral superiority of colonisers. The same can be applied to Wilbur Smith's narratives, which introduce elements such as political conspiracies, technological wars or romance, while remaining essentially imperialist adventures written for the purpose of validating the rights of British settlers over South African territory and their moral and technological superiority over blacks and, to a lesser extent, Afrikaners.

I also want to point out, at this stage, that what I attempt to do in this section is provide the traits that characterise adventure. I do not analyse the genealogy of adventure in this section mainly because it would take up too much space, but also because my interest lies in imperialist adventure in particular. In the following chapter, in which I analyse imperialist adventure, I focus on both the characteristics and the development of imperialist adventure.

<sup>16</sup> These I provide in **Appendix 1**.

In his analysis of the scheme or pattern in a group of James Bond novels, Umberto Eco explains that “in the novels of Fleming the scheme follows the same chain of events and has the same characters, and it is always known from the beginning who is the culprit, also his characteristics and his plans.” The predictability of Fleming’s novels, however, Umberto Eco adds, does not deprive readers of the enjoyment popular narratives are supposed to supply, quite the opposite:

The reader’s pleasure consists of finding himself immersed in a game of which he knows the pieces and the rules - and perhaps the outcome - drawing pleasure simply from following the minimal variations by which the victor realises his objectives. [...] It would be [...] accurate to compare these books to a game of basketball played by the Harlem Globe Trotters against a small local team. We know with absolute confidence that they will win: the pleasure lies in watching the trained virtuosity with which the Globe Trotters defer the final moment, with what ingenious deviations they reconfirm the foregone conclusion, with what trickeries they make rings round their opponents.<sup>17</sup>

Ian Fleming’s novels are an exaggerated example of pattern repetition but they disclose the pleasure of predictability. Readers who enjoy Ian Fleming’s novels do not expect to be surprised: they want to know who the villains are and what makes them villainous from the start so that they can applaud Bond’s victory over them; they want James Bond to seduce beautiful women and to manipulate sophisticated technology; they want violence, they want sex, they want action. Fleming’s world is pleasurable not only because it offers excitement that people seldom have in their ordinary, down-to-earth lives, but also because readers know what to find in this fictional world. This knowledge is not only enjoyable, but also empowering (or rather, enjoyable because it is empowering). Certainty as to what is to happen next is not only the privilege of the author, but also of the reader. The readers’ knowledge of what to expect grants them control over the narrative; it makes them participate in the action, giving them scope (a sort of omniscient gaze over the text) to predict results; to foresee consequences of the actions hero, heroines or villains perform; to ascertain the triumph of the hero in the end despite the dangers and obstacles threatening him.

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<sup>17</sup> Umberto Eco, “The Narrative Structure in Fleming,” *Reading Popular Narratives*, ed. Bob Ashley, 107.

In a world of uncertainty in all areas of experience, the predictability of generic fiction comes as a relief because, in the world created in this type of fiction - no matter how difficult the problems, how dangerous the opponents or how dreadful the monster hiding in the cupboard - the hero (or heroine) is going to survive and, often, take the girl (or the boy) and the money / recognition on the side. An analysis of the elements that make up adventure, therefore, reveals more than just a pattern of predictable situations or combination of them; it discloses what it is that readers / viewers find pleasurable in adventure and, thus, what they expect to find. Such an analysis of adventure ultimately reveals why, in general, the readership / audience of adventure is mostly made up of men. If enjoyment, as Eco argues, comes from predictability as to what to expect, the enjoyment of adventure comes from the knowledge that in this genre readers / audiences are going to be provided with narratives that revolve around a powerful, invariably mighty, hero who readers / audiences can identify with, a locale away from home and home-related responsibilities that sets off men's hardy virtues and the defence of a status quo that invariably privileges men's supreme rule. The analysis of the characteristics of adventure, therefore, is not only relevant as a framework that allows a better understanding of adventure and how it works, but it also elucidates the masculinist interests it serves.

### **3.2. The constitutive elements of adventure**

#### **3.2.1. Physical locale**

There is a specific adventurous locale, one that can be found in other generic practices but which is characteristic of adventure. The basic requirement for a setting to be adequate for adventure is that it has to be physically remote from what is mundane to intended audiences or readership and, consequently, outside the home. Houses can be pictured as remote by making them sinister, mysterious, brimming with unexpected dangers and hidden trapdoors, dark corridors, windowless basements or creaking, sky-high, winding spiral staircases, but are not satisfactory for adventure.

Similarly, contemporary city scapes do not befit adventure. Again, cities seethe with a warren of lanes, cul-de-sacs, canals and boulevards which are especially bewildering and sinister at dusk or in the fog, and which lie outside the ordinary experience of the average citizen. Likewise, cities hide conspiracies of crime and may appear as vast panoramas of horror where ordinary life is haunted by what goes on at night or in the fog; or as phantasms in which nothing is what it seems and some people lead totally double lives. In short, the city may be a place of deceptions and of dangerous differences that generate envy, rage and madness under every kind of cover. But cities do not belong to adventure but to other genres such as detective fiction, thrillers or the gothic.<sup>18</sup> Adventure requires an altogether different locale, one that is physically remote and rough, uncivilised and colourful, exotic and luxuriant.<sup>19</sup> As the novelist Ivan Goncharov phrases it, the landscape of adventure is that,

[...] where the sun squeezes life out of a stone, [...] where man, like our first ancestor, garners fruit that he didn't plant, where the lion roars, where the snake slithers, where nature, like a temple dancer, breathes voluptuousness, [...] where the unbridled imagination becomes drunk before the reality, where the eyes gaze ceaselessly, where the heart beats.<sup>20</sup>

### 3.2.2. Period (temporal setting)

Brian Taves closes his chapter "The Era of Adventure," which deals exclusively with the use of history in adventure, with the following words:

Adventure is a contradiction in the modern world, even an anachronism - at best irrelevant, at worst archaic - or else exalted to a specialist's job, whether as

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<sup>18</sup> As I have explained in a previous note, though, the 'adventurous' potential of cities is being explored in what I regard as the contemporary reformulation of adventure, action. The *Die Hard* series has even been translated as *La jungla de cristal* in Spain, and adventurous patterns have been increasingly included in this and other action films in which heroes engage in adventurous pursuits requiring feats of courage and displays of athletic, Tarzan-like prowess in city landscapes. In some other films, the adventure hero is directly transplanted into city-landscapes and uses the skills used in the wilderness to survive and / or fight evil-doers in the city; an outstanding example would be *Crocodile Dundee 1*.

<sup>19</sup> Favourite adventurous locales are: unlovely regions of rock and sand, deserts, mountains, caves, unknown islands, hidden continents, coral islands, paradises of bright blue water and coconut groves, vast prairies and wide open seas, icebergs, border countries, strange places thick with savages and dangerous animals, forests or jungles; places favoured are India and Africa, the Far East, the Mediterranean, the backwoods of Canada and the States, the grassy plains of Australia, the isles of the Pacific, the distant shores of Columbia, the Scottish highlands, the Arctic circle or the rural areas of European countries such as France, Russia or Spain.

<sup>20</sup> Ivan Goncharov, *The Frigate Pallada* qtd. in Martin Green, *The Adventurous Male*, 155.

astronaut or a deep-sea navigator. Even the exploration of the world's remote regions becomes largely the province of scientists, persons of a far different character than the dedicated amateurs of adventure. If there is adventure in this century, it is of a fundamentally different kind, suited to an age of questioning the nobility of so-called adventure motives.<sup>21</sup>

He is probably right. A series of circumstances have smoothly wiped out adventure from our contemporary world: by World War I, the loss of faith in militarism, which had already begun to be questioned during the first stages of the demise of the British empire, was complete. A conflict so utterly lacking in justice, chivalry or purpose shattered old illusions about the beneficent effects of adventure and fighting, and as a consequence, no longer could such a brutal, searing conflict be portrayed as an adventure. After World War II, the last bastions of imperialism faded, and even the most remote areas became developing nations rather than colonies; consequently, the use of these remote locales that formerly belonged to adventure has grown increasingly problematic in the twentieth century. With the social, psychological, industrial and military tensions of the cold war and the hangover that followed, and still continues, its momentarily euphoric grand finale (epitomised by the collapse of the Berlin Wall), adventure has been precluded in almost any environment. Although men aspire to find adventure, their efforts become futile or destructive in a cynical, modern world and would-be heroes find themselves unable to sustain adventure's ideals that turn increasingly sour in our post-industrial world. Indeed, adventure belongs to the past, and heroes are out of place in modern times, an attitude that the title protagonist of the filmed version of Scott's novel *Quentin Durward* summarises:

I have been described as a slightly obsolete figure. I was raised for the knighthood. I was trained to the lance and the bow and the sword. I was taught to be proud, to praise God, to defend the weak, to respect womanhood, to be loyal to my family, and to be true to my word above all things. [...] That's about all. I was born perhaps a few minutes too late.<sup>22</sup>

This does not mean that adventure cannot be written or succeed at present. On the contrary, and as Northrop Frye explains, adventure will never disappear, but will turn up again and again, as hungry as ever, looking for new hopes to feed on,

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<sup>21</sup> Brian Taves, *The Romance of Adventure*, 110.

<sup>22</sup> From the script by Robert Ardrey. qtd. in Brian Taves, *The Romance of Adventure*, 110.

searching for “some kind of imaginative golden age in time or space.”<sup>23</sup> It only explains one of the principal characteristics of adventure: its remoteness in time. Since adventure is mostly exiled from modern contemporary settings and military conflicts,<sup>24</sup> the genre relies on events of the past; otherwise, and as I have pointed out above, it is set far from the geographical areas more familiar to its audience or readership. Adventure, therefore, favours past historical periods, although its own period of setting is distinct from the setting typical in other historical genres such as the western, the ancient world-biblical epic, or the world wars of war fiction.

The period settings adventure favours are those when European civilisation established world dominance from the Middle Ages through the nineteenth century, most often in Europe, including France during the reigns of Louis XIII and XIV and Cardinals Richelieu and Mazarin; Spain during the Moorish period or the wars against the first Bonaparte; the home front in England during the Crusades with Prince John usurping the absent Richard the Lion-Heart, the frequent wars between England and France and the struggles for independence of smaller nations such as Scotland or Ireland. The expansionist endeavours of the British empire and other world powers during the nineteenth century are also adventure favourites, together with the formation of new nations in various parts of the European empires, such as South Africa and India.

In adventure, history is often presented more as a myth than as an accurate recreation. Some adventures are meticulously reproduced and some adventure writers even believe that historical accuracy is a must in the genre. Sabatini, for instance, wrote, “to produce historical romance of any value, it is necessary first to engage in researches so exhaustive as to qualify one to write a history of the epoch in which the romance is set.”<sup>25</sup> More often, however, only enough background is provided for a

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<sup>23</sup> Northrop Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism*, 186.

<sup>24</sup> These contexts, in turn, have been turned into the backgrounds of spy novels and thrillers involving political intrigue or military conflict. Wilbur Smith, in order to write his adventures and defend his own particular ideals of white might and tough masculinity progressively has to rely on the past. Increasingly, and as I explain in the following part of the dissertation, particularly in chapter 10, the past becomes the only locale where Smith can sustain his ideal of essential masculinity. When he writes about contemporary settings, he makes sure he highlights the heroes he creates belong to the wilderness, nonetheless, and furnishes them with wild locales where they can display their manly attributes.

<sup>25</sup> Sabatini qtd. in Brian Taves, *The Romance of Adventure*, 64.



perfunctory sense of historicity that keeps the central characterisation from becoming entirely fictional. Adventure is expected to amuse rather than to enlighten, to entertain rather than to engage in historical reconstruction, so authenticity is sacrificed in favour of fiction.

### 3.2.3. The quest and its implications

The generic structure of adventure is that of a quest involving, according to Frye, a perilous journey, followed by a crucial struggle, usually some kind of battle, that brings to the head the conflict between the protagonist and his enemy, and a final resolution; this quest is often narrated in an episodic form progressing linearly up to a climax. The nature of the quest undertaken by the hero can be physical or moral. If physical, it involves travel and exploration; our planet is presented as space to be circumscribed, covered and compressed by a 'mobile hero'; eventually space is invariably conquered, becoming a metaphor of the triumph of man over environment. If moral, the quest varies from adventure to adventure: the fight against injustice, the threat of lawlessness, the saving of a nation, the overcoming of fear or the defeat of an enemy; but the outcome is without fail triumph or economic reward.

The use of a quest structure in adventure calls for the existence of three other generic requirements. In the first place, by undertaking a quest, the hero disregards sentiment, dialogue and family, and becomes totally committed to action: he must move forward, he must act, he must overcome obstacles and adversaries, he must face and ultimately defeat death. The hero's body, consequently, comes to occupy a centre-stage protagonism through his ability to act: his muscles are put to the service of the quest - to cover physical distance, to engage in violence, to impose his own will on a dangerous situation, including the other people involved, or to overcome another person's aggression. The physical element of the quest, however, is sometimes not the most significant as quests are enlightening and emotionally stirring. Quasi-spiritual experiences ensue from the attempts to overcome the merely physical: the hero grows up, matures and becomes more committed to the service of society or God. Secondly, pursuing a quest involves penetrating into the unknown and abandoning the usual

mundane continuity of existence. As José María Latorre puts it, extraordinary circumstances intrude into ordinary circumstances and, as a consequence, the hero's ordinary reality is assaulted, subjected to violence or shaken up (what he calls 'realidades violentadas').<sup>26</sup> Hence, risk ensues and the hero has to call for courage, leadership or endurance. Eventually he becomes a non-violent person who is better at violence than his enemies and who has potestas on his side - the power to dominate both territories and peoples, to triumph, to right wrongs.

Finally, the use of a quest structure has an altogether sexist implication. The quest undertaken by the hero is necessarily hazardous, novel and exciting. The hero becomes involved in circumstances that are sufficiently risky and potentially rewarding for the subject. And these circumstances that allow adventure to take place and a quest to be undertaken cannot be encountered in the domestic space. It follows, therefore, that the quest will bring the hero out of the house and, especially abroad, in locations safely distant from home and family, where "increasingly perilous adventure may occur."<sup>27</sup> The domestic sphere does not allow for adventurous undertakings and, consequently, women, systematically enclosed in the domestic domain, will seldom be allowed an adventurous quest.

#### 3.2.4. Risk and familiarity

The essence of adventure resides in risk since, without risk, there can be no adventure. Risk is not unique to the genre but it is essential to it, for when the hero's ability is pitted against the unknown and he has to take his life literally in his hands, adventure ensues. However, excessive risk may cause the experience of excitement to give way to anxiety, which, of course, must not be produced in adventure stories. The adventure story has to offer an imaginary world in which the readers / audiences encounter a maximum of excitement without being confronted with an overpowering sense of anxiety, insecurity or danger. Consequently, a "paradoxical tension between risk and control remains at the heart of adventure."<sup>28</sup> Adventure authors or script-

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<sup>26</sup> José María Latorre, *La vuelta al mundo en 80 aventuras*, 10.

<sup>27</sup> Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes*, 58.

<sup>28</sup> Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes*, 53.

writers must make their heroes face dangerous situations and terrible perils so that excitement is generated. At the same time, the adventure story must retain the conserving familiarity of well-established generic conventions made stable through endless repetition and offering the comfort of a known experience. Readers / audiences of adventure know from the start that the hero will triumph and regain his safety at the end of the story. So the position of risk, danger and uncertainty within adventure is enjoyed to the full because the adventure pattern guarantees a pleasurable resolution.

### 3.2.5. Adventurous topics

Although adventure utilises topics that are characteristic of other genres, such as detection (the reading of clues or signs) and deception (what appeared as something is shown to be something else), which are typical of detective fiction; or threats, curses, prophecies, melodrama, disguises, buried treasures, mysterious messages or codes, masked identities or imprisonment, which are typical of Gothic fiction; there are topics that are typically adventurous and, as such, are often used in the different types of adventure that exist, serving as an excuse for adventure to commence or accompanying the quest the hero undertakes. The variety of adventure topics in stock is such as to preclude exhaustive treatment and, consequently, I will not attempt to be comprehensive here, only illustrative, providing a list that exemplifies the mercurial character of adventure, together with its phenomenal potential. The list includes the following: cruelty and cunning, orgies of slaughter, miracles of high-hearted devotion, revenge, leadership, comradeship, the military, freedom-fighting, exploration, voyages, duels, swordplay, hand-to-hand combat, archery, jousting, chases on horseback, intrigues, politics, fights against oppression, patriotism, honour, hearty and healthy emotions, royal intrigue, coronations, renunciations, hunting escapades, curiosity, life-risking activities, fight for survival, brotherhood, shipwrecks, scientific pursuits, justice, search for lost worlds and civilisations, conflict between natives and intruders, treasure hunting, and a long, long etcetera of related topics. These topics, straight-forward as they may seem, are generally used to reveal universal truths about the nature of humankind and its social mores: the duality of human beings, the

persistence of atavistic values underneath our civilised coating, the cruelty of childhood, the barbarity and evil that lurks behind civilisation, or human curiosity and our persistent striving to reach beyond the limits of the known world.

### 3.2.6. Violence

Violence and death feature prominently in adventure; after all, and as Martin Green puts it, “a lot of what we call adventure is really tragedy with a high-spirited name.”<sup>29</sup> Adventure, in fact, requires a movement towards violence and, as a consequence, violence appears in all its multifarious forms in adventure: combats, killings, duelling, quarrelling, fencing, brutal murder, cruel and bloody war, swordplay, tricks and acrobatic stunts and blows, aggression, feverish sleeplessness, double march, perilous leaps, slaps and fisticuffs, executions, flogging, destruction, conquest. There is both loud violence, involving blood and iron, and quiet violence, involving domineering relationships with conquered peoples, women or servants. Adventure celebrates life lived at its full and, therefore, the capacity of human beings to engage in violence if need be; indeed, adventure sticks to the maxim, ‘it is better to live one day as a lion than a hundred years as a sheep’. Violence is not unique to adventure for it is also present in other generic forms (in war and crime fiction, for instance), but, unlike in these genres, violence is not condemned in adventure, only taken for granted since it is acknowledged as intrinsic to man. Truly, adventure focuses on the narrow and fragile partition that separates ordinary life from violence and barbarism and the capacity of decent young men to revert to the primeval savagery of their forebears. Violence, however, is not indulged in without motivation; on the contrary, it is violence that protects the just in their peaceful pursuits; it is used to combat the villain and his forces.

### 3.2.7. Liminality

Adventure relies on strangeness for its development, the intrusion of the unexpected and extraordinary into the ordinary, but also, and very importantly, on

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<sup>29</sup> Martin Green, *The Adventurous Male*, 115.

liminality and freedom. All societies have a centre where law is promulgated and fully established and, thus, it takes upon itself the actions and sanctions needed to maintain order. In the centre, life is mechanised, systematised, impersonal; the civic and social contracts rule supreme and peoples adhere to values or obligations such as work, the hierarchy of responsibility, family, duty, security and comfort; in short, the contingencies of civility and respectability. Within these peaceful and highly-organised social constructs, any perversion of the socially-dictated morality produces a bad conscience, repentance and, consequently, they offer no opportunity for adventure. Adventure exists in liminal areas, both physical (border countries or frontiers, oceans, the wilderness, deserts, forests) or metaphorical (where the moral and social criteria of civilised life break down under the stress of one kind or another). Around these literal or symbolic frontiers, there is a fringe of darkness where dangers lurk and emotions surface and adventurers can / have to stick to values or qualities which the ordinary and law-abiding citizen would frown upon: awe, the excitement of killing and sinfulness, eroticism, hedonism, strength, virility, violence, war-fever, courage and leadership (that is, the truths of the body, of open sexuality and open aggression). In these liminal areas adventurers can engage in vigorous, free and joyful activity, they can rejoice in being *filis de joie* and in the promise of an experience without traces.

The liminality of adventure, however, does not preclude moral behaviour or accepted social values. Adventurers are the children of freedom and find trim hedgerows and cultivated fields, the comforts and obligations of dull-paced domestic or productive life, asphyxiating, preferring the indulgence that reigns in liminal territories and the qualities and activities required there. However, this does not mean that social institutions are despised in essence. Adventure is often pursued when law is feeble or in decay, when wrongs are committed that cannot be put right through the establishment or, even, when wrongs are perpetrated by the establishment itself. On these occasions, the adventurer moves outside the moral and the social just to purify social institutions and purge them of their contaminating evils by applying a fiercer and purer authority. For a while, therefore, the heroes enjoy the pleasures of lawlessness; they successfully transgress the law, but these transgressions are

justifiable for they are committed in the name of justice and morality. After wrongs have been redressed, consequently, society, firmly but benevolently, gathers the adventurer into its arms and ascertains he will henceforth be a decent and orderly citizen. Anarchy, after all, is never an option in adventure.

### 3.2.8. Wish-fulfilment and escapism

According to Northrop Frye, adventure is nearest of all literary forms to the wish-fulfilment dream. It imagines an utopian world more exciting, benevolent and fulfilling than our own, in which, as Graham Dawson argues, “the ordinary laws governing real existence are suspended to allow human experience to be suffused with the marvellous, the miraculous and the magical.”<sup>30</sup> Supernatural or magical events do not occur in adventure; yet, the ordinary, even the gruesome, is presented in such a way as to be rendered exceptional, heroic, marvellous. A war narrated as adventure, for instance, will not project a nightmarish, dystopian world split against itself. Instead, it will picture powerful, superior and triumphant heroes moving through the fields of battle without incurring serious harm in a language of heroism in which the soldier will be elevated into a ‘warrior’, the battlefield dead into ‘the fallen’, and the blood of young men into ‘the sweet red wine of youth’. Adventure is written or displayed to entertain with excitement and diversion; emphasis falls on fun, mirth, splendour and thrill; it presents events as colourful, not as black or white, right or wrong; it amuses our imagination and is to be experienced, as Green puts it, with our senses, “with the creak of the saddle or the mast in our ears, the smell of the sea or the leather worn by soldiers and sailors, which is the smell also of gunpowder and of blood.”<sup>31</sup> In short, adventure is written for boys who do not want to grow up; not for the melancholy and morose, but the ones who can enter with sympathy into the regions of fun and excitement.

Escapism, however, is not absolutely superfluous, but serves a three-fold objective. First, it compensates the reader / viewer, through identification with the

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<sup>30</sup> Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes*, 55

<sup>31</sup> Martin Green, *Seven Types of Adventure Tale*, 217.

hero, with vicarious power for his or her lack of actual power in politics and the workplace. Second, particularly through the use of a bygone time in which men and women were gallant and charming and the sword served to uphold justice and right, it strengthens the readers' / viewers' belief in an essentially benevolent and just humanity. And finally, it permits a few moments of emotional relaxation: focusing, even for only a moment, on victory in a broader situation relieves frustration and provides hope that the viewer / reader, too, may overcome obstacles.

### 3.2.9. Realism and verisimilitude

Unlike fantasy, which relies on the supernatural or otherworldly, and science-fiction, which relies on the potentialities of science and technology in what I regard as a 'not yet time'; adventure takes the factual and the actual as points of departure in what Martin Green calls 'factual imagination'.<sup>32</sup> It is true that, as I have explained above, adventure is read / viewed for fun and has a dream-like quality in the sense that, in adventure, dreams come true, justice triumphs, evil is punished, heroic deeds are accomplished and the elements are defeated by man. But the facts of adventure are not fantastic, like in fantasy; nor do they have futuristic implications, like in science-fiction (in which detailed scientific explanations are provided to serve as a factual basis to back up the implications of science or technology in future universes). The facts of adventure are actual past or present realities, or rather, recommend themselves to audiences / readers as real, even instructive. In adventure, history is carefully illustrated and real historical events or settings are reproduced, even if superficially, to serve as the background against which the story unfolds; technology features importantly in accounts of railway journeys or sea voyages; or the climate, geology, agriculture, flora and fauna of remote regions is painstakingly described or pictured. A dream, adventure seems to suggest, cannot be enjoyed in full if it appears too unfamiliar or surrealistic. A dream, in short, is more powerful if rooted in full humanity and adventure makes sure to recommend itself as a dream that lies within the possibilities of fact through the use of verisimilitude and emphasising realism.

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<sup>32</sup> Martin Green, *The Robinson Crusoe Story*.

3.2.10. The characters of adventure: the hero

According to Cawelti, the hero is an essential figure in adventure stories, for without him, adventure would not ensue: adventure necessitates a larger-than-life hero, a “fantasy figure overcoming dangers and accomplishing some important and moral mission,”<sup>33</sup> who undertakes an adventurous pursuit and brings it to a successful denouement. Now, heroes come under different shapes and attires in adventure; they can be braggarts, ruffians, daredevils, highwaymen, sailors, pirates, crusaders, empire builders, frontiersmen, fortune hunters or big-game hunters; but whatever their career, they share a series of characteristics that render them heroic, that make them different from industrious, abstemious, meek, gentle, soft and obedient ordinary individuals, and that transform and valorise them regardless of their historical character. Many are these heroically-charging characteristics, which I proceed to outline.

In the first place, heroes share a prototypical physical appearance. They have an impressive build. They are generally tall, broad-shouldered, lean, comely, tanned with a ruddy and cheerful hue; eyes are grey or green, hair is dark and curly, forehead is high and smooth, lips are full and red or thin and compressed, and face is joyous with the thought of the fame of his deeds or rigid, tough and calm, but always fit to be engraved on a medal. In short, he is debonair, healthy and attractive, endowed with personal magnetism and sexual glamour, as opposed to the other unheroic, short, dark, crooked-of-limb men who populate adventurous backgrounds and whose main function is to set off, by contrast, the physical magnificence of the hero. The hero's athletic build-up is not only decorative: it promotes identification, for we like to identify with the beautiful rather than the plain, on the one hand; and, on the other, serves the hero an important purpose, that of enabling him to overcome physical obstacles, both human and environmental. The body of the hero is, consequently, highly promoted in adventure for it is through the body that the hero comes alive and his adventurous potential surfaces. Thus, we see the hero's body in action on various occasions: overcoming the experience of sickness and wounds, hunger and weariness, and even mutilation; running, leaping, riding or duelling; pitted against huge, old,

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<sup>33</sup> John Cawelti, *Adventure Mystery and Romance*, 39.



fierce animals; manipulating weapons; or, like Edmund Dantes, relieving himself from a sackcloth shroud as it enters the ocean and wriggling free, delivering himself from an imprisoning womb and swimming heroically to freedom: the epitome of the heroic body being born to the adventurous experience. The age of the hero varies in different narratives, but he is never old. Old and avuncular, often white-bearded, men proliferate in adventure, but they are never the protagonists; instead, they play the roles of parental figures from whose experiences and advice the heroes learn. Heroes are either children or young men (between 20 and 30), an age when there is still room for maturation and growth so that we can become witnesses of their striving towards, and eventually accomplishing, manhood. Otherwise, they are older, middle-aged figures; less innocent, glamorous or aristocratic than their youthful counterparts, they are men of experience, living in rugged surroundings, who, although disillusioned, still have their dormant adventurous ideals intact so that a process from cynicism to altruism can ensue.

Heroes are also characterised by their marginality. They belong to the margins of civilisation and to outlawry. They feel ill-at-ease where law and order rule for they have filtered civilisation out of their blood, and seek to live in freedom. Consequently, they are either removed physically or morally from well-established social centres, the city and its institutions. If physically removed, they choose to live in frontier territories or outside the confines of civilisation (jungles, deserts and other untamed territories). They are torn between civilisation and savagery and seek the consolation of nature, the wilderness and alien tribal cultures, without ultimately relinquishing their dealings with civilisation and civilised values, which, ultimately, they serve. If morally, they live in self-imposed or obligatory exile for they are the victims of the wrongs and corruption of those in government; thus, they have to pass beyond the law periodically, but in the name of justice so as to rectify the flaws in the system. Otherwise, moral or physical exile comes from disillusion in love, religion, politics, unfair government or the nature of heroism, but the genre dictates that they eventually regain faith in themselves and society and, consequently, they engage themselves in just and altruistic pursuits. Whatever their motivations, heroes are characterised by a willingness to live in rugged terrain or to sacrifice the comforts of civilisation in the

confines of cities and other social structures. Heroes, after all, do not belong to domesticity, the claims of the family or the ordinary conventions of day-to-day existence.

This outlawry and remoteness from civilised existence add spice to their personalities, rendering them mysterious and enigmatic, different from ordinary men, superior, almost divine in their charismatic aloofness. However, heroes are limited to earthly powers; they cannot call upon the otherworldly or the magical to aid their cause; they are not super-heroes or godlike individuals exhibiting extraordinary or divine qualities. They must rely on the qualities possessed within. After all, they are fallible human beings, restrained by human limitations, who find themselves in extraordinary conditions that require them to draw on certain innate abilities and powers in order to undertake an heroic pursuit and succeed in it. Eventually, it is their ability to succeed through individual strength (both physical and moral), perseverance and skilful manipulation of technology that renders them heroic, superior to the audiences or readers but never to the laws of nature. Their ultimate human nature cannot be disregarded if their achievements are to remain within the realms of possibility and human endeavour and if identification is to ensue. Consequently, no hero is presented as completely faultless or virtuous. Flaws are, therefore, allowed in order to prevent the hero from being too detached from the audiences or readers whose ideals they serve. Thus, he is presented as too naive, trusting, stubborn, excessively confident or ready to disobey an order on occasions. These flaws may result in a setback or capture, but he is ultimately able to summon courage and self-discipline to escape his ordeal. Similarly, minor indulgences are included in his make-up in order to highlight his ultimate humanity: drinking, gambling, debts and even the instincts of a Don Juan.

An amorous nature is in fact one of the defining traits of the hero. A hero, by definition, is a lady's man; he is unattached and has a roving, uncommitted spirit which, together with his good looks and magnetic personality, makes him irresistible to women. However, he has also a sentimental side and, when he falls in love, he is smitten at first sight. From the moment he gives his heart to a woman, he becomes

committed to a monogamous relationship which puts an end to his roguish capers, and all his actions are planned around her to the extent that he will overcome all sorts of perils to save her from danger, abduction or other perils. The woman eventually domesticates the hero, who is reintegrated into the establishment through marriage. This does not mean that his adventurous pursuits will be abandoned for a woman or that the hero will forsake other social obligations for her. Ultimately, the hero is committed to high social justice and to social obligations and he will only marry after liberty and justice have been achieved. Similarly, he is ready to relinquish the woman he loves in the face of social obligations; in the adventurer's code, duty has a definite hierarchy, with responsibility to country and the larger cause of justice and liberty occupying the highest position. Consequently, and particularly for those of royal blood, true love may be frustrated if the country is at stake for no hero would put social stability into jeopardy in the pursuit of personal happiness.

Another characteristic of heroes in adventure is their commitment to action. Heroes are no Hamlets torn with indecision, but 'conquistadors' who have dominated life, wrecked its normal rules, its monotony, and have done it not by their dreams, like romantic writers, but by their deeds. They are men who have escaped shipwreck, storm, mutiny, fire, desert conditions, the clubs of savages, the stake or Polynesian cannibals, or who are perfectly adapted to do so. They are men of emergency who, at a glance, solve problems that had baffled their companions; who are willing to face whatever perils may occur, confront danger and risk their own lives; who are never passive but relish hazardous and exciting occurrences; who overcome seemingly invincible obstacles, undergo tribulations and survive the pressures of circumstance and locale; who are almost ubiquitous and omnipotent in their mobility and strength; who bear arms, dispense justice and manifest authority and splendour; who seldom require more than minimal persuasion to assume leadership. Furthermore, although they are ready and willing to resort to action and they often rely on instincts for survival, they also have a psychological and intellectual dimension. They often subject their deeds to examination, analysing the moral implications of the actions they are about to commit, and take the perils they encounter as trials that will strengthen their character and help them grow and mature. Also, they methodically weigh chances,

consider hazards, take precautions, predicate action on a wise strategy, devise ingenious schemes (disguise is a favourite) to escape or fight danger and find resources that others would fail to notice. In short, they seldom rush blindly or allow emotion or personal concerns to govern decision or endanger a cause for they know that unplanned or precipitous action can only lead to debacle and complicate the hero's ultimate task.

Heroes are also characterised by their individualism. They never subordinate themselves completely, retaining their wanderlust and love of freedom and independence. Consequently, although they are committed to their companions in adventure and to larger national concerns, they are ready to disobey orders when the need arises; they prove their resourcefulness by undertaking solo missions; and they seldom share the adventurous experience with another. Ultimately, adventure must be undertaken alone, facing danger and adversity in self-sufficient isolation, exceeding orders and exercising personal judgement. This does not mean that the hero is selfish or narcissistically committed to himself and his personal needs. Heroes are necessarily virtuous, courageous, patient, wise, just, persevering, fearless, impeccable in their ways and, above all, chivalrous, devoted to their particular Round Table: their code of honour, which they cannot break. Although personal interests such as wealth, love, family, victory, glory, fame and promotion are important to the heroes, they are secondary. The code of honour will steer the heroes to productive and altruistic means as well as goals and ensure they find causes worth serving, particularly, the causes of patriotism, justice, liberty and community: the values of the nation; as Taves puts it, "adventure heroes exist on a national, rather than universal, scale. They serve primarily as embodiments of political views, and their exploits illustrate a value system."<sup>34</sup> The nation and national well-being are, therefore, the heroes' main concerns and they will accept sacrifice, torture and even death rather than betray their loyalties towards their patriotic code of honour and its hierarchy of priorities. This code does not render them blind, for they acknowledge the possibility that their homeland may be wrong; if this is the case, the heroes are opposed to authority, whose legitimacy they doubt or whose policies they oppose. Ultimately, their code of honour

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<sup>34</sup> Brian Taves, *The Romance of Adventure* 76.

makes them put their powers to the service of the people and rightful and honourable government. With righteousness on their side, they commit themselves to an ideal worth fighting and dying for, gladly daring life and limb to assist an exploited class, the underdog, the ill-treated or the displaced - the rights of the common people - and to oppose tyrants and oppression no matter the source. In doing that, the hero is always selfless in his motives, never desiring a kingdom or power that does not rightly belong to him; stepping back when justice is established leaving the government to others but ready to come back if needed again. Ultimately, it is always the status quo he serves.

### 3.2.11. Characters around the hero: the heroine, the sidekick and the villain

When Wendy, the heroine of Barrie's *Peter Pan*, is finally allowed to penetrate the realm of adventure and its boyish glamour, she is only a disturbance for, instinctively, her main aspiration is to become Peter's beloved and to enforce women's sentimentality and romantic domesticity into a realm that is traditionally the province of boys who do not want to be tied to the bourgeois obligations, codes and mores of Victorian England. In Barrie's paradoxical indictment / celebration of the ethos of adventure, which is explicitly presented as the territory of boys who are reluctant to grow up and accept social responsibilities, there is no space for bourgeois masculinity (Mr Darling is only a superfluous figure whose powerlessness is such as to be denied entrance in his own home and be forced to sleep in the dog's house on some occasions - no Flingstone's yell included!!); and, above all, there is no space for womanhood and femininity: Mrs Darling is just a radiant presence, or rather, absence for she is excluded from the adventurous action; and Wendy, although allowed to partake of Peter's exploits in Never-Never Land, is a clumsy adventurer; the only function she is able to properly fulfil is that of mother-figure and nurturer of the Lost Boys. Indeed, as this narrative exemplifies, adventure is the territory of boys and their grown-up versions; women are minor and centrifugal, a disturbance, a distraction, a reward, a decoration, "the horizon point for the heroes of this male enterprise."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Martin Green, *Seven Types of Adventure Tale*, 58.

Women's inferior status in adventure is not a random narrative convention but dictated by history and geography, the result of women's long exile from the colonies, the rough frontier territories, the military and the political centres of decision-making. But this has not precluded women's presence in adventure. Although there are a few narratives (particularly those that take place on desert islands, in the open sea or in the colonies of the British empire) where women are often excluded, more often they share protagonism with the hero, becoming a pervasive and important presence. However, they are not allowed to participate in the adventurous action that the hero undertakes alone and which holds our attention completely. Women are forced to play passive roles. Mostly, they are mothers, wives, mistresses, camp followers in a domestic realm where men are the only means of contact with historical events; their main roles are: that of holding the family together or guarding the values of domesticity by staying at the fireside, welcoming the men and boys home from their expeditions or consoling and nurturing them when things go wrong or they are injured; and that of assisting men, becoming equal in status to heroes' male servants such as Joe in Verne's *Five Weeks in a Balloon*, who fulfils the same domestic functions women perform at home: he "orders you dinner exactly to your taste, [...] packs your portmanteau and never forgets the shirts and socks, [...] keeps your keys and secrets - and never gives up either."<sup>36</sup> Otherwise, women are regarded as desirable, attractive and meek brides that are the object of the hero's devotion and of the villain's lust. If they are presented in this passive, although inspirational and romantic role, they are often placed in perilous situations, providing the hero with the opportunity he seeks to prove his nobility, chivalry, courage, altruism, and, very importantly, furnishing him with an excuse to act, undertake an adventurous pursuit or fight the villain, on the one hand; and, on the other, highlighting the woman's subservient position in adventure, for she is lost without a hero to save her life or rescue her when perils ensue. Also, women not only function as recipients of the hero's romantic attentions or domestic figures in the background, but as rewards, part of the hero's victory over adversaries and a side-benefit they receive together with wealth, honour and other personal gains.

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<sup>36</sup> qtd. in Martin Green, *The Robinson Crusoe Story*, 132.

Not all women are presented positively or passively in adventure, however. If sexually alive, women are depicted as threatening presences; they are villainous temptresses or seductresses, sometimes the evildoers accomplices, and are eliminated from the narratives, often executed (like Milady in Dumas' *The Three Musketeers*) or made to suffer hideous, painful deaths (like Ayesha in Haggard's *She*). Often, nevertheless, they are redeemed before their death through sacrifice by attempting to aid the hero and his supporters in a noble cause. On the other hand, and as Taves explains, "there is no inherent reason within the genre's narrative structure to be male. While casting women in centre roles may be contrary to audience [and readers] expectations, the genre is adaptable to such a change."<sup>37</sup>

Together with the heroines, the heroes are surrounded by other characters in their adventurous experiences. These are the sidekicks and the villains. The sidekick is often a companion that provides contrast with the hero, is a mentor or loyal friend who offers advice, or plays a humorous role for comic relief. He joins the hero during hours of relaxation and adventurous exploits, but never overshadows him; on the contrary,

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<sup>37</sup> Brian Taves, *The Romance of Adventure*, 135. Adventure has indeed been dominated by male writers and male heroes. However, there are a few exceptions that prove that the genre can be and has been revitalised to include women as well as men. Bessie Marchant, for instance, wrote adventure stories in which heroines feature as protagonists, of which *Daughters of the Dominion; a Story of the Canadian Frontier* (1909) is a representative. Of Marchant, Richard Phillips writes:

"Bessie Marchant [...] thoroughly [reworked] the western Canadian adventure to subvert boundaries between home and away, women and men, potential emigrants and fields of emigration. [...] Including girls and women as heroines, and acknowledging them as readers, Marchant used the medium of adventure to reconfigure the boundaries between home and away, women and men." Richard Phillips, *Mapping Men and Empire. A Geography of Adventure* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997) 98.

Also, actual, real-life women left stifling home-environments in search of freedom and adventure in the nineteenth century, women who wrote about their experiences in journals in which the 'authoresses' themselves were the protagonists. An interesting study of Victorian women explorers that illustrates how women became active participants in colonial endeavours both as agents and protagonists of adventures and as recorders is: Dea Birkett, *Spinsters Abroad. Victorian Lady Explorers* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989). Although exceptions exist, on the whole, however, women were (and, it seems to me, still are) marginalised from adventure writing. The same applies to adventure cinema. Very few women have been allowed to play the adventurers in this medium and, when they have been, they become male transvestites, acting and behaving like men (sometimes only in a few scenes); or have tragic or romantic finales that vanish them from the adventurous landscape at the end of the film. Examples are *Anne of the Indies* (USA, 1951; the film is more an exploration of sensuality, sexuality and jealousy than an adventure and Anne Providence is killed at the end); *At Sword's Point* and *Against All Flags* (USA, 1952; both films have a few scenes with Maureen O'Hara dressed like a man and brandishing swords); and *Jolanda, la figlia del Corsaro Nero* (Italy, 1952; the film, again, is more a playful exploration of transvestism with lesbian undertones than an adventure). More recently we can find *The Pirate Movie* (Australia, 1982) and *CutThroat Island* (USA, 1995). Both these films, however, have been notorious flops and have received unfavourable critical response.

he highlights, by contrast, the qualities, both moral and physical, of the hero, and follows his commands without ever questioning him. The villain, on the other hand, is generally an old man, shrivelled in the soul and alienated from youth, nature, ardour, gaiety, charm and warmth. The villain, however, does not necessarily have to be a single individual, but can be a threatening and sinister organisation or an alien culture or race (Portuguese slave-traders and painted, feathered and frantic cannibal tribes, are favourite villainous figures). Whatever their number or origin, villains share certain characteristics and motives that immediately set them apart from the hero and his noble endeavours: they are anarchists and materialists at heart; lack ethics; lust after women; disrupt peaceful lives; are inherently violent and fanciful; force others to violence; incarnate oppression; are flawed by pride, avarice, ambition; they are treacherous and lack scruples. Although they possess the adventurer's skills, activity and decisiveness, they lack the heroes' virtues; while the heroes are instruments of peace, villains are the instruments of evil. Even their physical make-up and behaviours contrast sharply with those of the hero: once handsome, their indulgences turn them into 'transvestites' of the hero's more restrained appearance; they are furthermore too suave, their thin obvious veneer is excessively smooth, exposing their cruelty, crudeness and gaucherie. In short, they take on demonic qualities and personify the failings of the culture's mythologies. As a consequence, we do not identify with them, but with the hero; as Dawson puts it, the villains invite "projective disapproval and denigration of the qualities [they display]."<sup>38</sup> After all, "heroes are the men whom in our hearts we would rather resemble; our villains illustrate those failings we are striving to avoid."<sup>39</sup> Eventually, villains are always defeated and, since the readers or audiences' values are bound up with the hero, the villains' defeat is anxiously expected and enjoyed to the full.

Although villains, ladies and sidekicks are recurrent in adventure, and to conclude, they are secondary to the action. The interplay with the villain and the companion and the erotic interests served by attendant ladies are more in the nature of

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<sup>38</sup> Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes*, 55.

<sup>39</sup> Brian Taves, *The Romance of Adventure*, 121.



frosting on the cake. The true focus of interest in the adventure story is the character of the hero, the interests he serves and the nature of the obstacles he has to overcome.

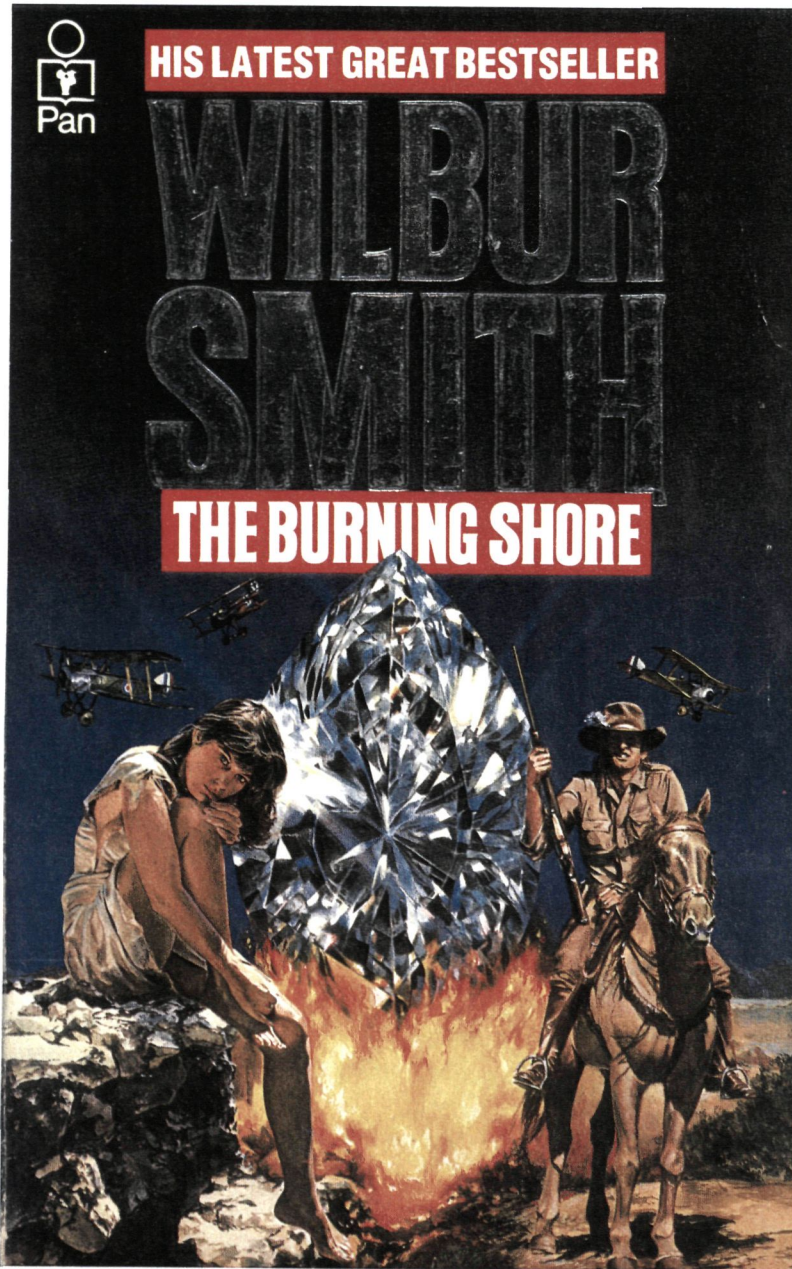


Figure 4. Cover for Wilbur Smith's *The Burning Shore* (London: Pan, 1986). Illustration by Kevin Tweddell.