

DECONSTRUCTING THE AMERICAN DREAM: AMERICA THROUGH KNUT HAMSUN'S EYES

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ABSTRACT. *Deconstructing the American Dream: America through Knut Hamsun's Eyes.* This paper examines Knut Hamsun's perception of the American way of living as depicted in his *Fra det moderne Amerikas aandsliv* (*The Cultural Life of Modern America*, translated into English in 1969 by Barbara Gordon Morgridge), published in Copenhagen 1889, and in one of his short stories, *Raedsel* (*Fear*, translated by Sverre Arestad), which he has published fifteen years after his return from America. Hamsun's American experience was rather different than the one of most immigrants in America, but this article demonstrates that the Norwegian writer's insights into the life in the New World, though bitter and inclined to criticism, must be studied in order to achieve a broader perspective upon the immigrant experience in the land of opportunities.

Keywords: *Knut Hamsun, the American dream, immigrant literature, America, Norwegian-Americans*

REZUMAT. *Destrămând visul american: America prin ochii lui Knut Hamsun.* Lucrarea de față analizează percepția lui Knut Hamsun asupra stilului de viață american așa cum a fost descrisă în volumul *Fra det moderne Amerikas aandsliv* (*Din viața culturală a Americii moderne* – tr.n.), publicat în Copenhaga în 1889, și într-una din nuvelele sale, *Raedsel* (*Spaimă* – tr.n.), pe care a publicat-o la cincisprezece ani după reîntoarcerea din America. Experiența lui Hamsun în America a fost destul de diferită de cea a majorității imigranților, dar acest articol demonstrează că observațiile scriitorului norvegian asupra vieții în Lumea Nouă, deși acide și înclinată spre critică, trebuie studiate pentru a dobândi o perspectivă mai largă asupra experienței imigranților în țara oportunităților.

Cuvinte cheie: *Knut Hamsun, visul american, literatură imigrației, America, norvegieni în America*

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Introduction

This paper examines Knut Hamsun's perception of the American way of living as depicted in his *The Cultural Life of Modern America*, published in Copenhagen 1889, and in one of his short stories, *Fear*, which he published fifteen years after his American experience, in the collection of short stories *Kratskog: Historier og Skitser (Brushwood: Stories and Sketches*, Copenhagen, 1903).

Like thousands of his fellow Norwegians who have immigrated to America starting with the beginning of the 19th century, Knut Hamsun embarked for the New World in search of a better life. His dream, "when a callow, ignorant youth, crossed the Atlantic to bring poetry to the lives of the Norwegian emigrants to America"² was to secure himself a living by doing what he liked best: writing. However, it is striking how very different his account of his pursuit of the American Dream was when compared to those of the majority of the Norwegian immigrants in America. We have to bear in mind the fact that these texts are rather subjective, teeming with harsh feelings towards the land of materialism and inverted values, written by a thirty-year-old aspiring writer after a struggling battle for survival, eager to assert himself, but we, nonetheless, consider it is important to get a glimpse into Hamsun's personal experience in the United States of America in order to achieve a broader perspective upon the immigrant experience in the land of opportunities. The first part of this paper will offer a brief account of Hamsun's immigration to America, further focusing on the way he depicted America upon his return to Europe, whereas we will later discuss one of his short stories evoking the Norwegian writer's American experience, a genuine blend of reality and fiction.

Living the Dream?

Born in Gudbrandsalen in 1859, Hamsun spent his childhood in Northern Norway, but rough times began once he was sent, at the age of nine, to work as apprentice for his uncle, who used to starve and beat him. He returned home after five years and, while performing various jobs, he read avidly all the books he could lay his hands on, becoming, at the same time, more and more aware of his passion for writing. After struggling for a few years of to become a writer – the dreadful winter of 1879-1880, when he nearly starved to death in

² John T. Flanagan, "Knut Hamsun's Early Years in the Northwest", in *Minnesota History Magazine*, No. 20 (December, 1939), p. 397. <http://collections.mnhs.org/MNHHistoryMagazine/articles/20/v20i04p397-412.pdf> (Accessed: 25.08.2017).

Christiania (Oslo), was later depicted in his well-known novel *Sult (Hunger)* –, Hamsun set his mind for the New World. Full of hopes, the young Hamsun departed for America in 1882 with a reference letter from Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson himself, to meet Rasmus B. Anderson, professor at the University of Wisconsin, who had a close relation to the Norwegian-American community and encouraged the immigrants to write³, and Hamsun hoped he would help him achieve his dream to brighten the lives of the Norwegian-Americans by opening their hearts to poetry.

However, Hamsun's dream didn't seem as tangible upon his arrival in America. Professor Anderson did not encourage him to write and advised him to make a living through manual labour. So he ended up spending his first stay in America working on Eastern farms, then in a store in Elroy, Wisconsin, where his brother Per was leading a more humble existence than the one mentioned in his letters, and later in a lumber firm in Madelia, Minnesota. However, this period proved also useful as he managed to learn English from a schoolteacher in Elroy named Johnston, while in the house of the Norwegian Unitarian minister Kristofer Janson and his wife Drude Krog Janson in Madelia he got the chance to spend time reading or translating texts and talks, as well as practise his writing. He stayed a year with Janson as his secretary until he was diagnosed with tuberculosis in 1884, when, with the financial help of the Unitarian congregation, he set sails for Europe to die in peace in his homeland. But the odds had something else in store for Knut Hamsun. The diagnostic may have been wrong as he completely recovered on his way home. Back in Norway, he got in contact with Lars Holst, editor of the newspaper *Dagbladet*, for whom he occasionally wrote some articles, published an article on Mark Twain, whom he had met and appreciated during his first stay in America, but was still not content with his situation and decided to try again his luck in America.

Knut Hamsun's second voyage to the land of opportunities began in August 1886 as correspondent for *Dagbladet* and *Aftenposten*, but he still had to seek manual labour in order to support himself, so he worked as a streetcar conductor in Chicago. This job did not suit him at all as he had a poor sense of direction, was distracted and absorbed in his own thoughts, hence the company soon discharged him.⁴ After a few months' stay at Oliver Dalrymple's bonanza farm in Red River Valley, North Dakota, in the summer of 1887, Hamsun returned to Kristofer Janson and to the Norwegian-American community in Minneapolis. John Flanagan manages to sum up very well Knut Hamsun's second American experience:

³ Odd S. Lovoll, *The Promise of America. A History of the Norwegian-American People*, Revised Edition, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, London, 1999, p. 214.

⁴ Arlow W. Andersen, "Knut Hamsun's America", in *Norwegian-American Studies*, Volume 23, edited by Carlton C. Qualey, Norwegian-American Historical Association, Northfield, Minnesota, 1967, p. 181.

His overpowering ambition was, of course, to write, and only intellectual work could ever satisfy him. His work on a Chicago streetcar and a Dakota plow was only a stopgap, something to tide him over temporarily. His real interest lay in literature, in reading the sentences of other people and in polishing and shaping his own.⁵

After a rather peaceful year in Minneapolis, spent by giving lectures on French and Scandinavian writers to a moderate audience of thirty-forty people, in 1888 he gave at Dania Hall a final address to his fellow Norwegians in America, in which he bitterly criticised American materialism and cultural life and which would be used as basis for his *Fra det moderne Amerikas aandsliv* (*The Cultural Life of Modern America*). Once again, he returned disappointed to Europe, where, although starving as he was wandering through the streets of Copenhagen, Hamsun said: "How very agreeable this country is. I assure you the whole existence – way of life – here is in deep harmony with my temperament, my nature. Here is Europe, and I am a European, thank God."⁶

Not All Dreams Come True

"Knut Hamsun has become identified in our minds with the lonely figure that recurs again and again in his earlier books, the Wanderer who is for ever outside of organized society and for ever pays the penalty of being different from the crowd and unable to conform to its standards."⁷, says Hanna Astrup Larsen, the first to write a book on Hamsun in America, in 1922. She later outlines the hopes with which the young writer embarked for America:

When he started out for the New World he did not go merely as an immigrant to seek his fortune. He hoped to find those larger opportunities for leading his own life and using his gifts which the poets had been telling him about. He had bruised himself on Old World littleness; quite naturally, he looked to the New World for bigger visions, ampler spaces, and a saner estimate of a man's worth. In this he was destined to be sorely disappointed.⁸

⁵ Flanagan, *op. cit.*, p. 405.

⁶ From his letter to Yngvar Laws, published in *Sønner af Norge*, Minneapolis, 1929, p. 389, as cited by Harald Næss, *Knut Hamsun and America*, Scandinavian Studies, Vol. 39, No. 4 (November 1967), pp. 305-328, p. 308, Published by University of Illinois Press on behalf of the Society for the Advancement of Scandinavian Study, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40916881> (Accessed: 25.08.2017).

⁷ Hanna Astrup Larsen, *Knut Hamsun*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1922, p. 3.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

When reading about Hamsun's recollections of the New World, we should bear in mind that his perception of America needs to be analysed from the wanderer-perspective⁹, of the traveller who is always on the go, never intending to remain in one place, but rather to discover as many new places and people as possible. Driven by restlessness and the desire to become a well-known writer, lacking patience to endure going through the same ordeals that manual labour meant for a person who cherished literature and intellectual activities above all else, Hamsun is forced to admit his dream of enlightening the Norwegian-Americans will never come true. For sure, this must have influenced the way he perceived life in America and how he later described it in his lecture given in 1889 to the student society at the University of Copenhagen¹⁰, which he afterwards developed into his book *The Cultural Life of Modern America*, "a violent diatribe against American materialism"¹¹.

Hamsun is first of all shocked by the hustle and bustle of life in America, a land in continuous movement; the noise, the agitation, the alert life on the streets¹², and this speed and noise is to be found everywhere, even when going towards West, far away from the big cities. The country is undergoing full development as floods of immigrants settle wherever they can find land and Americans are convinced that the restlessness and the energy they possess are traits that Freedom itself has bestowed upon the American character.¹³ He remarks that the New World is so very different from the one the immigrants know that they always feel as strangers, despite all efforts put into adapting to this new environment. They are confused by all the new things they encounter and experience, they dread not knowing the language well enough to buy themselves shoes, for example, and they become entirely engrossed by the perspective of earning as much money as possible. The immigrants lose their peace, but they are indeed active, as the American society is¹⁴.

Hamsun then criticises the American stark patriotism, Americans organising parades to honour their war veterans, a symbolic expression of the strong feelings they have for their country. However, he considers them to be self-centred, ready to attack anyone opposing their wishes. "Their patriotism is without boundaries; it is a patriotism that never blinks"¹⁵, he says. More than that, they seem to be completely unaware of what is happening beyond

⁹ See Sanda Tomescu Baciu, "Knut Hamsun: the Artist and the Wanderer", in *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai, Philologia*, LV, 1, 2010, p. 26, starting from the dichotomy nature-society.

¹⁰ Andersen, *op. cit.*, p. 183.

¹¹ Flanagan, *op. cit.*, p. 397.

¹² Hamsun, Knut, *Fra det Moderne Amerikas Aandsliv*, P.G. Philipsens Forlag, Copenhagen, 1889, p. 1.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3-4.

¹⁵ "Deres Patriotisme er uden Grændser; det er en Patriotisme, som aldrig blinker" (Our translation) *Ibid.*, p. 5.

their country, thinking that they are the ones creating everything new, that there is no such freedom, no such development, there are no such intelligent people as in America. He sums it up in one sentence: "There is only one country: America; what's out there, beyond it, is nothing good."¹⁶

Above all, Hamsun was struck by the greedy materialism he could see everywhere in America. Most Americans had emigrated for economic reasons, so it was only natural that all their energy was directed towards earning as much as possible in as little time as possible. He maintained his opinion years later, when publishing the article "*Festina Lente*", in *Aftenposten*, in 1928: "God is forgotten, the mighty dollar has taken his place and the mechanic cannot ease the troubled soul. The road is closed. Under circumstances such as these America only increases speed. America will not stop for anything, it wants to get on, go on, forge a way ahead. Should America turn back? Absolutely not! It simply increases the pace a hundredfold, acts the hurricane and whips life up to a white heat. In Europe nowadays we have the word Americanism, the old days had *festina lente*."¹⁷ Nonetheless, he cannot help noticing, not without a certain admiration, how determined and ambitious the Americans are: "A New Yorker is still alive who last winter lost his immense fortune speculating in railroad lands. At present he has a job as a clerk in a branch office, but he will try again! If you think he is going to give up, you are mistaken. An American is not cut out that way."¹⁸

American Legacy

Despite the harsh criticism Knut Hamsun showed towards the New World, he would be inspired by it throughout his writing.¹⁹ We have decided to discuss *Fear*, a short story which he published fifteen years after his return from America, in the collection of short stories *Brushwood*. We consider it representative for Hamsun's life as a worker in the Midwest, as he relates an episode that took place while working in a lumber firm for Henry Johnston in Madelia, Minnesota. It is also iconic for his belief that "rootlessness breeds lack of responsibility, disregard for law and order, and a seeming disdain for the dignity of man. And yet, while it appears that the law of the jungle rules life, there nevertheless emerges in his writings a kind of moral condemnation of evil."²⁰

¹⁶ "Det er ét Land: Amerika; hvad der er over dette er ikke af det gode." (Our translation) *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁷ Knut Hamsun, *Festina lente*, article published in *Aftenposten*, 12th of December 1928, translated by Richard Nelson Current, *Knut Hamsun Remembers America: Essays and Stories, 1885-1949*, University of Missouri Press, Columbia and London, 2003, p. 132.

¹⁸ Richard Nelson Current, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

¹⁹ Tom Conner, "Going Off the Beaten Path: Knut Hamsun's Forays into Travel Writing", *Nordlit*, nr. 38/2016, Tromsø, <http://septentrio.uit.no/index.php/nordlit/article/view/3766/3656> (Accessed: 25.08.2017)

²⁰ Sverre Arestad, *op.cit.*, p. 154.

Madelia was the place where “Jesse James, America’s most bloodthirsty and most powder-blackened bandit finally was captured and killed”²¹, where Hamsun had gone to stay and manage the lumber firm owned by Johnston, the former teacher who had taught him English, while he was making a trip, with his wife, in the East of the country. During the day, he would be selling lumber, in the evening he would be taking the money he had made to the bank, while at night he would be all alone in a big house, with no neighbours nearby. Although he admits feeling bored sometimes, Hamsun did not feel afraid at all, until one night, when the working day lasted longer than usual and he arrived too late at the bank to deposit the 800 dollars he had made that day. “There was to be a night, however, when I became seized by a hair-raising fear the like of which I neither before nor since have experienced. And for a long time afterwards I bore the mark of my experience that night.”²² Hamsun recollects. As he was writing late in the night, he heard the door and realised there were thieves attempting to enter the house. Trembling with fear, carrying a revolver in his hand, the young immigrant got bolder as he relied on the heavy door and threatened the perpetrators. He fired outside the single bullet he had and the thieves run away, leaving him awake throughout the rest of the night. The story ends, he escaped safe and sound, but the fear lingered and, as he confesses, that night had given him an experience he had never had before:

But I have never been so afraid for my life as that night in the prairie town Madelia, Jesse James’s place of refuge. It has happened to me a couple of times since when I have become frightened that my heart has beat right up in my throat and prevented my breathing. This remains from that night. I had never before known a fear that could manifest itself in this extraordinary manner.²³

Concluding remarks

The portrait of America as depicted by Hamsun is that of a country dominated by self-sufficiency and materialism, a country of Yankees in pursuit of fortune and social influence, with little interest for arts or literature. But the young writer looked at America with the eyes of an idealist: “Hamsun’s view of life was the view of an aesthete. To him the ideal society was one which displayed a special harmony resulting from mutual confidence, tolerance and graceful customs among its members.”²⁴

²¹ Knut Hamsun, *Fear*, translated by Sverre Arestad, *op.cit.*, p. 166.

²² Knut Hamsun, *Fear*, translated by Sverre Arestad, *op.cit.*, p. 168.

²³ Knut Hamsun, *Fear*, translated by Sverre Arestad, *op.cit.*, p. 171.

²⁴ Harald Næss, *op.cit.*, p. 312.

He still appreciated some of the core American values: “The principles according to which America takes the dregs of Europe and turns them into good people ... are not disappointing, for they are the principles of humanitarianism and equal liberties ... the great wonderful community feeling which America can teach all people in the world.”²⁵

America did not make his dream of writing and bringing poetry into the lives of Norwegian-Americans come true as he remained a keen observer, a wanderer that was not so eager to give up his cultural heritage in order to adapt and become American. But America continued to animate his thoughts and we envisage a further theme for research, namely the analysis of the American influence in Hamsun’s writing.

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²⁵ Knut Hamsun, in an article written in *Aftenposten*, Oslo, January 21, 1885, as cited by Harald Næss, *op. cit.*, p. 307.