

## **The Frontier : The Westward Movement in American Literature**

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### **Abstract**

The frontier myth or frontier tall tales is a term given to the popular romanticization of the Wild West frontier. The frontier was the term applied to the zone of unsettled land outside the region of existing settlements of Americans. The notion of the frontier was the edge of the settled country where unlimited free land was available and thus unlimited opportunity. The history of Frontier tells the story of the defense and creation of communities, the use of the land, the development of markets, and the formation of states. This is a tale of subjugation, but also one of endurance and the merging of peoples and cultures that gave birth and continuing life to America. The American frontier comprises the geography, history, folklore, and cultural expression of life in the forward wave of American expansion that began with English colonial settlements in the early 17th century and ended after the civil war with the development of the transcontinental railroad. This era of massive migration and settlement was particularly encouraged by President Thomas Jefferson.

**Keywords:** Economic, Spiritual, Political.

### **1 Introduction**

The Frontier means outer limits of settlements or the boundary of settlements. The Frontier is a symbol of hard struggle with the violent forces. It means the settlements and the migrants of the European Colonists from 1620-1893, because of some religious, economic and political causes some European people (Protestant) came to America in 1607 and established their colonies such as Virginia (Tobacco Co.) colony, Plymouth Colony, James Town Colony etc. The settlement on the eastern coast of the Atlantic Ocean is called the 'New England Colony'.

The first settlement in America were called the 'Pilgrim's Father', after these pilgrims more and more people came from Europe to the eastern part of the America. They settle in colonies such as Massachusetts and other colonies. In this way after 13 years there were 13 colonies. As more and more people from European countries came to America. Their need for land forced them to precede them from East to the West. That is from the Atlantic to Pacific coast. The Frontier began to move in 1620 and it closed in 1892-93. In that year the Govt. of America has passed very strict immigration laws and no more foreigners were allowed to settle in America. This period of 300 years of migration

is called 'The Frontier'. Before the arrival of the settlers in 1620, America was all wilderness and jungle. There was no human habitation except the Red Indians. There were thick and huge forest, tall grass and rocky Mountains everywhere. However, the settler turned the wildness into a civilization. This immigration of several European people from the east to the West is called the frontier because the boundaries of their colonies were constantly changing and shifting. The frontier is a narrative story of complex interaction between man and land, wildness and civilization. This migration is extremely important in the cultural history of America because it shaped the American mind, history and literature. The frontier is a narrative story of complex interaction between dream and actuality, vision and violence.

### **2.1 Fredrick Turner's Thesis and its importance –**

The first man who talked about American culture or the significance of the frontier in American history was Fredrick Jackson Turner in July, 1893. He presented a paper at the Historical Congress. The title of the paper was 'The significance of the frontier in American History.' For the first time Turner pointed out that the constant westward movement played a very important role in American history. This is also known as 'Turner's Thesis', because of this thesis the frontier began at once the core point of discussion among the writers, poets and thinkers of the day and several dimensions of the frontier came into existence.

### **Comparison between Adamic Myth and The Frontier –**

We can compare the Adamic myths with the frontiers. The American people used the Adamic myth in order to create the American history because everywhere mankind needs the sense of history. So the American borrowed the Adamic myth from the Bible. Therefore America had become the second paradise for them and everyone became Adam. However, the adamic myth is non-realistic where as the frontier was a geographical reality characterized by several things. In Walt Whitman's poem, "Song of Myself", we find a beautiful description of the frontier's life. The adamic myth is ideal but the frontier is not idealistic but realistic. Adam in myth was innocent creature but the American Adam provided by the frontier was not innocent. He was a dynamic, mobile and all rounded personality.

### **The bright side of the Frontier –**

The frontier acted as a shaping force in the history of American culture. The most important and positive impact of the frontier was that it created a mobile and dynamic self. It shaped the

American mind. The free America wanted to build factories but because of the arrival of more and more people from European land was becoming scarce in the older colonies. This pushed the prices of land up, after 7 years of growing tobacco soil is worn out and therefore people began to think of moving westward to settle. The settlers went to cut the west through Red Indian Hunting lands. They cut forest and made roads. They went forth westward and made struggle over mountain in search for good life in the west. Therefore, in this struggle with frontier, the American self became dynamic, mobile and experienced. In the new conditions, the new atmosphere and new ethos created a very tough and very adventurous kind of personalities. This toughness was not only physical but it was also toughness of mind. The western cow-boy appearance was a direct product of the frontier. The frontier was a shaping force in the history of American culture. The frontier's mentality gave rise to the democratic temperament in the American culture. The early settlers had come from Britain, Spain, Germany and France. There were culturally different people but the American frontier brought them together. People from different colonies had an interaction with one another. They depend upon each other because of the mutual help and co-operation. The frontier sowed the seeds of democracy. The frontier was a force that brought together on an equal level, because of the frontier people ignored the differences in social rank, status and age. It created a sense of individuality.

In American culture, we find a difference between the transcendental individualism and the frontier individualism. In transcendental philosophy an individual was more important because he carried with himself; a larger reality of nature, over-soul and God. The transcendental individualism was philosophical and spiritual, but the frontier's individualism was based upon the sense of life and power. The frontier individual always thought about his victory, "I must establish my victory." The individualism of the cowboy is different from the transcendental individualism of Whitman and Thoreau. The Frontier individualism is an indication of tough sense of masculine power. In frontier individual 'GUN' was important and essential to protect themselves from wild animals and attack from Red Indians. Transcendental individualism was religious, humble, spiritual and philosophical. In American culture these two types of individualism co-exist.

The Frontier created optimistic belief that man can control the environment. The difficult conditions of the frontier tested man's spirit of adventure. It was both a physical and spiritual struggle. The 19<sup>th</sup> century American novelists were the product of the frontier. They were against the background of frontier. The writers like Mark Twain, James Cooper, Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne etc. were the major novelist of the period. They had grown up in the days of the frontier.

These novelists looked upon the best as a strange but beautiful land, vast spaces where man could live freely, for them the frontier was both dream and reality.

**Other aspects of the Frontiers –**

The frontier is a thematic metaphor to describe the American experiences. It has many implications such as geographical migration and settlement of Europeans from east to the west and the southern part of America. It also suggests the European dream for utopia or a new land (world). From cultural point of view, it stands for the struggle of settlers with Red Indian people. They wanted to establish their own puritan culture. The settler used to say that take their land and give them our religion. From economic point of view the frontier suggest the struggle of the settlers against nature for more and more food, raw material and gold. From spiritual point of view the frontier suggest the influence of puritan culture. From psychological point of view that frontier intends for a challenge to human capacity to fight and endeavor. It satisfies a violent struggle with a number of forces.

**Economic Frontier –**

The early settlers had to fight for their survival because America was a new world, a new land for them. They did not know how to produce a crop in a new side and new climate. They had to do a number of experiments. They brought land under cultivation and gold was discovered at Seiranevada and California. It opened up a number people sold their land and reached to Nevada for gold. However, they experienced fortunes and misfortunes on the economic frontier. They experienced victories and tragedies. It made them violent and aggressive. The love of gold made them greedy and dishonest. Mark Twain had also gone to Nevada as a gold protector in 1861-62. The troubles and tragedies of Nevada are described in his literature. Mark Twain has commented upon the ‘futility’ of human life, greedy for wealth. In his philosophical work, “What is Man”, he has presented a serious view of life. In ‘Huckleberry Finn’, we find a faithful account of the frontier. Twain’s humour is a typical product of pressure of life that he experienced in Nevada. According to Albert de Taine, the western humour found in Twain, he was a natural product of horrible condition in Nevada. The struggle was surrender, women laughed because they could not weep and men laughed because they were not sure of their life.

**Spiritual Frontier –**

The puritan settler had to fight on the spiritual frontier also. They wanted to spread their religion. They were very orthodox, ruthless. If anyone tried to challenge the puritan ideas, he was

tortured and even murdered. We find the examples of it in the historical record of England. In Salem, two hundred (200) women and girls were burnt alive by the puritan fanatics because they had claimed that they had seen God in forest but according the Puritanism God beyond the Bible was impossible. God was in the Bible and forest was the place of devil or Satan. In Hawthorn's novel 'The Scarlet Letter' the heroine Hester Prynne is publically insulted by the people for her immoral behavior. In Mark Twain's novel 'The Huckleberry Finn' Huck was warned by his guardian women to follow religion strictly as religion and God didn't create any miracle. Huck lost his faith in them. As a result of the excessive restriction, there was born strong in individualism, common people did not like those resurrection of the priests. They began to ignore and challenge orthodox and religious ideas. In 'Huckleberry Finn' the hero is a young boy. He escapes from the religious controls of two good ladies. He starts his journey to find out new territories. This indicates a strong sense of individualism. This individualism created democratic ideas. In 'The Scarlet Letter' the heroine challenges orthodox puritan's and asserts her own life.

The frontier was full of challenges. It was mysterious and frightening. The Scarlet Letter, constantly went to the west, the Red Indians didn't want to lose their land. Therefore, they always attacked white Europeans. The English Govt. was far away from the America. There was no law and order on the frontier. There was violence, crime and lawlessness and number of criminals, murderers etc. whereon flood and cliffs were present on the frontier along the river Mississippi. All the towns saw murder, fight quarrels, the culture of the riverside provided raw material to Mark Twain's and other American writers.

The frontier people didn't respect any laws but they believed in very savage kind of justice such as lynching ways very properly observed by the frontier. In Twain's 'Huckleberry Finn', we find many references of lynching. The frontier people like direct method of justice. In 'Huckleberry Finn', the frontier of Huck abuses the Govt. criminals which were lynched by the villagers. The village people blackened the face of the criminal. They got pleasure in it. It was a form of an entertainment and publicity for people. In Hawthorn's novel 'The Scarlet Letter', the entire town gathers at market place to watch and insult the heroine standing on the scaffold.

The American civilization had to change constantly by moving the frontier affected the American writers of this period. They borrowed object of theme from the frontier culture. As a result of it a new type of romantic adventurous hero was created by the frontier. In addition to cowboy story, civil war and the revolution story were added in American literature. The stories about border

gangs and out large were also written. On the frontier, every man carried a gun to defend himself and his large families and properties. The problem of slavery was very serious for the frontier. The frontier American people made Red Indian their slaves. The possession of Moor's was a mark of aristocratic and gentle life. Negroes were sold for life without permission; Negroes could not ask anything to their owners. If they ran away secretly, they were captured and sent back to their owners who would punish them mercilessly. The children of the slaves belonged to the white owner and not to the parents. We find a reference to this in 'Huckleberry Finn'.

Before the civil war, there were private schools for education, very few people attended it. Education was rare for the frontier. In 1790, some Methodist established 'Sunday School'. There was no common speech for the frontier. People had used very common dialect. In 'Huckleberry Finn', Twain had used dialects in order to escape from pressure of life. The frontier people indulge in ragging, drinking, running, theatre and circus. According to Fussal, American literature has its origin in the frontier. According to Bernard de Veto, Twain was the frontier itself and the novel is the presentation of American life in fiction.

#### ***The Frontier: American Identity***

According to Turner, the history of America up until 1890, had been unique. In Europe, boundaries were fortified divisions separating large populations. In America, there was no large population beyond the frontier other than a few native tribes who were not numerous enough to prevent the migration west. Turner explained it this way, 'The frontier is the line of most rapid and effective Americanization... The wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought.'

On the American frontier, on the other hand, people who moved west were forced to adapt. They had to fight Native Americans, learn to forage for food in the wilderness, and create tools and household implements from what they could find. The environment of the American frontier was so strong that it replaced European tradition, and from it arose the tradition of self-sufficiency that Turner says is distinctly American.

The frontier promoted a composite American nationality. People from many countries emigrated and moved west, resulting in a melting pot of cultures. Turner suggests that these people became 'fused into a mixed race.' Although Turner knew that there were pockets of the nation that were wholly German or English, he recognized them as a part of the emerging multicultural American

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