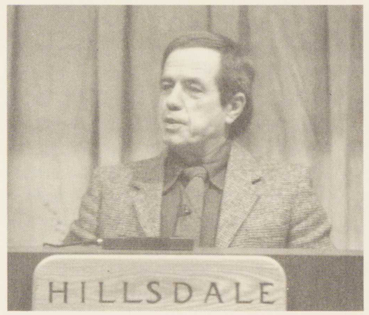
Freedom, Responsibility and the American Literary Tradition

The novel of morals and manners was central to the early American literary tradition. It articulated that which has distinguished the American character and the American national experience from the Old World. There is little doubt that, despite its obvious inheritances from abroad, there were indeed important distinctions. Says NYU Professor James W. Tuttleton, the greatest was the American "claim of liberty as the prior condition of all politics, religion and social organization. This claim is no less at the heart of American artistic endeavor, particularly in the novel."



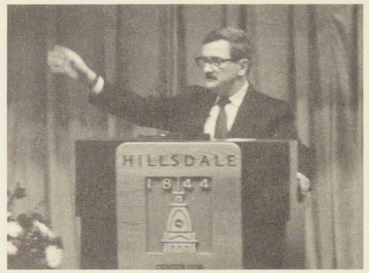
Best-selling author Larry Woiwode gave a reading from The Neumiller Stories.

Today, however, the "critics' choices" often dismiss such distinctions and consign society as well as literary tradition to the rubbish heap of outmoded consciousness and convention. Here are excerpts from Hillsdale's Center for Constructive Alternatives seminar on February 10-14, 1991, which take exception to that trend:

"The Tension Between Emerson and Hawthorne"

James W. Tuttleton, New York Univeristy
Author, *The Novel of Manners in America*

To speak of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Nathaniel Hawthorne together is to recollect one of the most lively and creative periods in American literary history. But it would be hard to imagine two neighbors so close who have so different a view of human nature, history and tradition, and of the workings of good and evil in human experience. Hawthorne was frankly disturbed at the discrepancy, as he saw it, between the Emersonian theory of human perfectability and the reality of human nature.



Hillsdale professor John Reist concluded the CCA week by recalling the theme of liberty which underlies the American literary tradition.

...The self vs. society, feeling vs. rational thought, freedom vs. responsibility, the passions of the individual vs. religious and social values, the role and status of men and women: much of the literary expression of the "American renaissance" is a manifestation of cultural struggle where contending values are dramatically debated and tested, an arena where principles are implicitly analyzed and their consequences are figuratively represented. Freedom is assumed as a given, but Emerson and Hawthorne diverge sharply on the question of how we make responsible use of that freedom. ♠

"Liberty and the Southern Tradition"

George Garrett, University of Virginia
Author, *Entered from the Sun*

The Southern writer writes about individuals, not groups. Part of the charm, the enchantment, of Southern literature from the earliest days until now has been its characters, that is, its literary celebration of odd and interesting individual characters. There is next to no place, then, for Marxist or Freudian determinism. On a lighter note, there is also a whole philosophy and way of life encapsulated in one remark by a character named Cherry in a story told by Lee Smith: "When you get to be too old to be cute, honey, you got to be eccentric."

In spite of all its cliches and conventions, contemporary Southern literature has more form and variety of content than any national literature allows, or indeed, than any other nation (Russia may prove to be the exception now that the Soviet Union has fallen into ruin and fragments).

...Of course, all this discussion of Southerners' love of diversity, of liberty, of individuality tempered by the code of manners and the dictates of reason–all this has avoided the question looming like a large threatening cloud on the horizon–What about slavery?

Post-Civil War Southern writers lived in a time of defeat, of guilt, and of fundamental contradiction. The South was the home of liberty on this continent. It was Southerners who held out for the Bill of Rights. And yet it was also Southerners who fought to the death, with truly extraordinary sacrifice and bravery, to defend their "right" to deprive others of their liberty.

University of Virginia professor and novelist George Garrett discussed historic conceptions of liberty in Southern literature before and after the Civil War.

No one in his or her right mind today would defend slavery. No one would deny that guilt was deserved, but rather than wallowing in it more than a century later and making blacks permanent victims and whites permanent oppressors, we should be devoting our energy to understanding what, contradictions aside, is the best legacy of Southern literature, and that is liberty. ♠

"T.S. Eliot and That Service Which Is Perfect Freedom"

Russell Kirk, Author, *Eliot and His Age*

Literary decadence commonly is bound up with a general intellectual and moral disorder in a society–resulting, presently, in violent social disorder. The decay of literature appears often as a result from a rejection of the ancient human endeavor to apprehend a transcendent order in the universe and to live in harmony with that order. For when the myths and the dogmata are discarded, the religious imagination withers. So it had come to pass with 20th century Protestantism, Eliot believed.

Religious postulates about the human condition having been abandoned by men of letters, the moral imagination starves. And presently the moral imagination gives way, among many people, to the idyllic imagination; and after they have grown disillusioned with Arcadia, they turn to the diabolic imagination, which afflicts both the best-educated and worst-schooled classes in Western society today.

Best-selling author Russell Kirk, whose 30 books have collectively sold over a million copies, is one of Hillsdale's most popular CCA lecturers and is a current Hillsdale parent.

...Eliot suffered no such affliction. He was a free man because he acknowledged a Master; a responsible man because he lived by a tradition; a great man of letters because he knew that literature has an ethical end. ♠

"What's Wrong With the Literary World: Egocentrism in the Name of Ideas"

Daphne Merkin, Former Associate Publisher
Harcourt Brace Jovanovich
Author, *Enchantment*

As a writer and an editor, I've come to the conclusion that what is wrong with the literary world is the disappearance of the good old-fashioned notion of character, which is now deemed quaint and retrograde. Today, when character comes up at all, we're told that it is inseparable from culture, which in turn is inseparable from the unexamined–or at the least insufficiently examined–precepts within the culture itself. These are precepts which presumably endorse the supremacy of one system of values–i.e., the white male capitalist system of values–over another presumably less suspect system.

The scrupulously relativistic, anti-exclusionist, nonjudgmental approach has led to a state of affairs both in the world of letters and in society that espouses equality for some and victimhood for all. In an article on the recent absurdities of the Modern Language Association called, "Deciphering Victorian Underwear and Other Seminars," the *New York Times* magazine noted that it has become a serious insult to even use the word judgmental. This climate has, in turn, led to a point where individual destiny and choice–in novels and in life–fall away and in its stead we come upon a clanking grid of causes, like a steel casing around living flesh, which does away with the quixotic and unexpected that is so much a part of the human scheme and offers in its place the tightest of causalities: "Due to such and such a class, gender, race and sexual predilection, one will only be comprehensible in such and such a way."

Daphne Merkin, novelist and former associate publisher of Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, noted that today's literature reflects too much self-absorption and too little character.

Thus Jane Austen, for instance, could no longer be comfortably approached as a spinster who lived with a moderate amount of pleasure amongst her family and wrote of the world in which she lived with witty, even subversive understanding, but instead must be viewed as a tragic instance of feminine compliance, who wrote novels with a secret subtext of insurrectionary intentions. ♠

☐ **ENCLOSED IS MY TAX-DEDUCTIBLE CONTRIBUTION TO HILLSDALE COLLEGE FOR $ _____**

Check boxes for more information:

- ☐ On-campus seminars of Hillsdale's Center for Constructive Alternatives.
- ☐ Off-campus seminars of Hillsdale's Shavano Institute for National Leadership
- ☐ Student Admissions
- ☐ Gift and Estate Planning
- ☐ Freedom Library books and tapes
- ☐ FreedomQuest

Specify format:

- (i) *Imprimis* (1-10 copies $.75 each 25–$10 50–$15 100–$30)
- (a) Audio tapes ($5.00 per tape)
- (v) Video tapes ($15.00 per tape)
- (p) or (h) Books (see catalogue for paper and hardbound prices)

Qty.	Format	Author/Title	Price
		Subtotal	
		Michigan residents, add 4% sales tax	
		Total	

FREE SHIPPING!
(Please make checks payable to Hillsdale College)

Imprimis is free upon request! Please let us know if there are individuals to whom you'd like to offer a subscription and join our efforts to reach an ever-widening circle of friends. List names below:

New subscriber _____ New subscriber _____
Title/Organization _____ Title/Organization _____
Address _____ Address _____
City/State/Zip _____ ☐ Home ☐ Office City/State/Zip _____ ☐ Home ☐ Office

(Please print – use second sheet if necessary)

Do we have your correct address? Indicate changes on the reverse side of this form. Or call: ***1-800-437-2268***