

A STUDENT-FRIENDLY LENS
ON HUMANITIES

Empire and Literature

An Introduction



Tom Durwood



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Author's Note

Welcome!!

I have had the pleasure of teaching a course in Empire and Literature at Valley Forge Military College. Encouraged by my cadets' enthusiastic response, I have generated a good deal of original course content in an open-access online journal, *The Journal of Empire Studies*. The approach is very simple: to consider literature through the lens of the rise and fall of empire. Students understand the theory quickly and seem to have little trouble applying it to various works. While the discussion may start with George Orwell, students see right away that it extends to zombie tales, *Gears of War* and *Harry Potter*. We enjoyed many lively debates. Anything that gets students to argue over George Orwell, Yukio Mishima, and Chinua Achebe is serving a purpose.

What follows in this ebook is an overview of my whole Empire Lit approach. It doesn't always work, but often it reveals a pattern. Teachers may find this material useful for a day's lesson plan, or a week's, or an entire study unit. Casual readers should avoid the last two chapters on Melville and Orwell and John Ford, since these sections dive deep into the empire idea. My writing here is more "scholarly" (almost unreadable).

Readers will form their own theories on the relationship between literature and the cycles of empire. Please contact me online, we will post your ideas on the Journal.

I don't fully understand my own theory. Also, my lists need globalizing. I am working on an expanded version of this text, so maybe I will get there yet.

-- Tom Durwood
www.empirestudies.com

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Recent scholarship in history, anthropology, literature and post-colonial studies has superseded traditional definitions of empire as a monolithic political and economic project. Emerging across the humanities is the idea of empire as a complex and contested process, mediated materially and imaginatively by multifarious forms of culture.

-- Arthur Melville

A historical map of the Novogrodeńskie Voivodeship (Severieńskie Księstwo) in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The map shows the region's boundaries, major cities like Novogrodek and Starodub, and the Dniester river. The text 'NOV GRODENSIS SEVERIENSIS DUCATUS' is visible on the map. The title 'Part One Overview' is overlaid in the center.

Part One Overview

INTRODUCTION

I have a theory of empire and literature. I also apply it to film, and (in a limited way) art, music and architecture. Here it is, in three parts:

- a) that literature and the workings of empire are connected.
- b) that specific works belong to or fall within the four quadrants of empire's cycle: roots of empire; rising empire; high empire; and falling or mature empire.
- c) that a work's enduring value derives from its capacity to address the workings of empire.

Despite its many limitations, this theory might prove useful for students, especially as they compare works across eras and across cultures. As empires change and progress, so do the stories we tell to make sense of the machineries and processes that support them.

Imperial stories like *Avatar* and *Saving Private Ryan* are easy to spot. Domestic empire stories that take place in parlors and kitchens and ballrooms are harder to pick out. Scholar Nalini Iyer holds that these are “masked” imperial narratives, stories that are premised on and celebrate empire, from the Ceylon tea the characters drink to the patriarchal rules (against which they rebel) to the brave soldiers returning from war in Afghanistan. “Men and women produced different narratives of Empire,” she writes, “because their imperial experiences were different.”

STAGE ONE: ROOTS OF EMPIRE

Stage One is for stories which depict the beginnings of empire – the moment when two cultures meet, before one culture begins to dominate the other. Legitimate Roots of Empire stories are hard to find. All man-versus-nature novels seem to me to be essentially Roots of Empire; the most fundamental task of any empire is to find food and shelter for its citizens, to protect them from the Empire of Nature.

WORKS/AUTHORS

Emperor of the Sun
Hiawatha (Longfellow poem)
Pocahontas
Robinson Crusoe
Tarzan
The Arabian Nights
The Heart of Darkness
Typee

FILMS

1492: Conquest of Paradise
A Man Called Horse
Black Robe
Jeremiah Johnson
Quest for Fire
Mowgli
The Mission
The New World
The Revenant

The Empire Theory of Literature

