



# American Tantalus: Horizons, Happiness, and the Impossible Pursuits of US Literature and Culture

*Andrew Warnes*

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*American Tantalus* argues that modern US fictions often grow preoccupied by tantalisation. This keyword might seem commonplace; thesauruses, certainly, often lump it in with tease and torment in their general inventories of desire. Such lists, however, mislead. Just as most US dictionaries have in fact long recognised tantalise's origins in *The Odyssey*, so they have defined it as the unique desire we feel for objects that (like the fruit and water once cruelly placed before Tantalus) lie within our reach yet withdraw from our attempts to touch them.

On these terms, *American Tantalus* shows, tantalise not only describes a particular kind of thwarted desire, but also one that dominates modern US fiction to a remarkable extent. For this term specifically evokes the yearning to touch alienated or virginal objects that we find examined by F. Scott Fitzgerald, Toni Cade Bambara, Richard Wright and Toni Morrison; and it also indicates the insatiable pursuit of the horizon so important to Willa Cather and Edith Wharton among others. This eclectic canon indeed "prefers" the dictionary to the thesaurus: unreachable destinations and untouched commodities here indeed tantalise, inviting gestures of inquiry from which they then recoil. This focus, while lodging cycles of tantalisation at the very heart of American myth, holds profound implications for our understanding of modernity, and, in particular, of the cultural genesis of the commodity as a form.

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