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Joseph C. Lincoln's Presentation of Cape Cod

Introduction

Joseph C. Lincoln's Cape Cod has stirred readers' imaginations for more than a century. His quaint villages, peopled with admirable and lovable folks, serve as attractive havens. Through his books and stories one has the option of escaping to Harniss, Ostable, Bayport, Trumet, Denboro, and other communities where adversity is overcome and romance is required. These towns, appearing only in the pages of Lincoln's fiction, are Cape Cod's own Brigadoons; they are alternative lands where fantasy obscures reality.

Like all fairy realms, however, these villages are treacherous. The unwary are lured into losing their sense of direction, into mistaking life as they think it should be for life as it is, into conflating the true with the false. Joe Lincoln's Cape Cod, like many enchanted kingdoms, shares characteristics with reality. As illustrated on slip jackets from his novels, these fictional villages feature lighthouses, picket fences, majestic clapboard houses, and ocean views, just as does the actual Cape Cod bounded by the waters of Vineyard Sound and Cape Cod Bay. (Figs. 1 & 2) These realities, however, are linked only tenuously; Joe Lincoln's Cape Cod is of New England, not in New England.

Lincoln's fictional Cape Cod was meant to represent New England, or what he on occasion called "Yankeedom." His portrayal, however, was selective, only superficially resembling the whole truth. In more than forty novels and countless short stories, he made his readers familiar with the region's boats, and harbors, and sand trails over pine scrub. Many defining features of New England's landscape however were purposely absent from Lincoln's vision, including, for example, the textile mills and triple decker houses which pervaded the region's urban areas. Lincoln did not omit these aspects of New England by accident or by coincidence, but rather he selected and constructed his Cape Cod in opposition to the developing New England of the early twentieth century. Lincoln proffered Denboro, Harniss, Wellmouth, and the other fictional communities as alternatives to the urban, industrial region taking shape as he was writing.

An iconographic vision of New England has developed over the last two centuries composed of stately old houses, white churches, stone walls, and town greens. Lincoln was involved in the codification of this imaginary alternative New England, but he did not work alone. Numerous writers, illustrators, photographers, preservationists, and other culture workers spent their lives creating this attractive fiction. Authors and scholars, including Joseph Conforti, of the University of Southern Maine, James Lindgren, of SUNY Plattsburg, and Tom Denenberg, of the Wadsworth Athenaeum, are currently engaged in disentangling how this image was constructed over decades and generations. This essay is informed by their research.

Joe Lincoln was born in 1870, during the period of national reconstruction following the Civil War, and passed away in 1944, in the midst of the Second World War. (Fig. 3) During his lifetime, both America and New England were vastly

transformed by technological innovations including electricity, telephones, automobiles, airplanes, and radio. The economy and the landscape also were reshaped by increasing industrialization and urbanization. Many Americans felt disconnected or alienated from their familiar surroundings. As a result, readers can appreciate Joseph Lincoln's portrayals of Cape Cod more complexly by situating them within the strains of twentieth-century antimodernism that shaped the ways in which New Englanders viewed themselves in these years.

During the period in which Lincoln wrote most prolifically, between 1904 and 1944, many Americans viewed the past nostalgically as a simpler time in the nation's history. The First World War marks a breaking point between two different, but related, strains of this phenomenon. Before the War, portrayals of old time New England were reactions to the forces of immigration and industrialization which were transforming the region. Following the armistice, the nation was more tightly bound together and New England's regional identity came to be asserted as a remedy against the crass commercial qualities of a nascent national culture. Joe Lincoln's "Cape Cod Yarns" were part of the warp and weft of a carefully crafted New England identity; his books both shaped and were shaped by this culturally constructed idea of "Yankeedom."

Cultural Background

Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, European immigration radically altered the population demographics of New England. Initially, the immigrants were Irish and German; as economic failures and political stresses shifted, after the 1890s they largely came from eastern and southern Europe. Many middle-class New

Englanders of English background were threatened by these newcomers. As early as the 1870s, Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, waxed nostalgic for "our New England villages in the days when its people were of our own blood and race, and the pauper population of Europe had not yet been landed upon our shores." In 1893, Samuel Adams Drake, a popular historical writer, complained that the area surrounding Paul Revere's house in Boston's North End was foreign territory. Using language that is objectionable to modern ears, he wrote, "The atmosphere is actually thick with the vile odors of garlic and onions - of macaroni and lazzaroni. The dirty tenements swarm with greasy voluble Italians. One can scarce hear the sound of his own English mother-tongue from one end of the square to the other." In 1905, John Fitzgerald, the Democratic Party candidate for Mayor of Boston and grandfather of a President of the United States, startled the Yankee Brahmin power structure by declaring, "Boston is an Irish City . . . New England is more Irish today than any part of the world outside of Ireland." Barret Wendell, a Harvard professor, bemoaned "We Yankees are as much a thing of the past as any race can be. America has swept from our grasp. The future is beyond us."

Industrialization was intimately tied to immigration. New England's factories and mills, which enriched their Yankee owners, could not have prospered without immigrant labor. The new work patterns within the factories, however, radically shifted networks and status within New England communities. Workers no longer knew their employers. They were no longer tied by anything other than an economic relationship. To use the jargon of classic European sociology, *gemeinschaft* had transformed into *gesellschaft*; community had been replaced by society.

Moreover, the old ideals of hard work and determination no longer held promise of economic success. Working in a factory on a single-purpose, dedicated machine yielded nothing other than more days of work on that same machine. Labor unions, evolved from working conditions in large scale manufacturing, further divided society along class lines.

In reaction to this new social order, a number of cultural figures, including Alice Morse Earle, an author who has been deemed the mother of American material culture studies, and William Sumner Appleton, the founder of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, began to imagine a better, finer, New England. They pictured a New England without immigrants or factories. These individuals created what the architectural historian Dell Upton has called an "ancestral homeland." Ancestral homelands, Upton explains "are invented traditions, in which the selective recall, exaggeration, and sometimes outright fabrication of traditional practices are used to define a distinctive, territorially based cultural identity for a nation or some fragment of one." In this formation, New England was not a burgeoning multicultural, industrial region; rather it was the quiet, artisanal country inhabited by the Anglo-Saxon descendents of the Puritans.

Wallace Nutting, a Harvard-educated Congregational minister, is notable among the purveyors of this carefully edited version of reality. Nutting, a near contemporary of Joe Lincoln's, was an entrepreneur and artist who worked in many mediums. Starting in 1904, about the same time that Lincoln began to publish seriously, Nutting created photographs, ran historic museums, and marketed reproduction period furniture. In all of Nutting's presentations, immigration, industrialization, and the twentieth century were

carefully kept out of the view finder. Simultaneously, however, the images were presented with crisp, photographic accuracy. Because the details are scientifically presented as factual, they ask the viewer to comprehend them as documentary.

Joseph C. Lincoln's Cape Cod

Having been born in the Cape Cod town of Brewster in 1870, Lincoln was forced to leave the peninsula as a child when his mother, widowed when her husband was lost at sea, relocated them to the urban, immigrant, industrial community of Chelsea, Massachusetts. Joe returned to the Cape, the land of his forbears, during summers. In 1923, Lincoln was quoted as saying that during those sojourns "he rode the old stage coach from Harwich to Chatham; he knew the lightkeepers, the fishermen, the life savers, and the cracker-box oracles in the village stores. The perfume of the green salt meadows, the pungent pines and bayberries . . . the fishing boats, dripping nets, the mighty surge and thunder of very existence." As he found his way professionally, first as an illustrator, then as a poet and editor, and finally as a novelist, the author continued to envision old Cape Cod as an Eden from which he had been expelled by economic necessity.

Cape Cod, because of geography, had largely been bypassed by the economic and social forces which had transformed much of New England. Southeastern New England had been the cradle of the industrial revolution in the United States because of its falling water. Streams traveling down hill had fueled cotton mills in communities like Pawtucket, Fall River, and the Blackstone River valley. Cape Cod had no significant descents of water upon which to build factories. Without employment, there was nothing to draw immigrants from urban centers like Boston, New York, and Providence where

they disembarked from the vessels that brought them across the Atlantic. Without a population influx, the communities on the Cape stayed small. In short, Cape Cod became an economic backwater. At the end of the nineteenth century, the writer Charles Nordhoff noted that "a moderately flush Wall Street man might buy out half the Cape and not overdraw his bank account."

As a marginal region change was stifled. The population remained relatively homogenous, derived from Protestant Anglo stock, and villages continued to be places in which everyone was tied by kinship, social obligations, and shared culture, as well as by economic links. In the field of historic preservation, practitioners jokingly say that there is nothing better than economic depression for the preservation of historic fabric; lack of money suppresses change.

When Lincoln reached his initial maturity as a writer then, in the first decade of the twentieth century, Cape Cod functioned for him as the parlor of a colonial edifice did for Nutting. Cape Cod became a place in which the forces of change could be denied or ignored, a place in which it could be argued that the spirit, the essence, of New England had been retained. Historian John R. Stilgoe argues that in this period "natives of the coastal realm seemed somehow a rediscovered population descended directly and perfectly from the gunkholing Pilgrims who had settled the sandy region three centuries earlier." This idea is epitomized by Lincoln's story "Payment Deferred." In this tale, a business debt owed by one Cape Cod family to another coincidentally gets settled among their descendents many generations later. In this romantic vein, one writer said of Lincoln, "He tells about plain, homely people and brings out their most lovable characteristics that are hidden behind rough exteriors, who are quick to recognize sham

and deception and to puncture balloons of pride and pomposity." This description encapsulates how New Englanders view the supposedly unchanging character of the region's inhabitants. The essential Yankee is perceived as grounded, as perceptive, as clever, as possibly unsophisticated or unfashionable, but always as virtuous.

In making this representation believable, Lincoln used detail as cunningly as Nutting. Whereas the photographer dressed his models in gowns of the colonial period and furnished interiors with antiques to maintain his illusion of time standing still, Lincoln similarly used landscape, material culture, folkways, and language to buttress the verisimilitude of his stories. The novels are filled with intricate, explicit descriptions of the Cape. He delineates the natural and cultural landscapes of the region. He tells us exactly what furniture people had in their houses, how it was arranged, and what they ate.

During his life, much of the criticism of Lincoln's writing focused on the accuracy of his descriptions. Writing in the *Cape Cod Magazine* in 1915, for example, L. C. Hall stated, "No man who has not had an intimate acquaintance with the people and localities of which he had written could ever have depicted so faithful narratives of Cape Cod personalities and local characteristics as they were a generation ago." Similarly, in the present, Stilgoe writes "Lincoln's descriptions of objects in space seem as realistic as any in contemporary non-fiction." Lincoln himself reported, "In attempting to transcribe the habit of language I have made it a rule never to use an expression or idiom I have not heard used by a native of the Old Colony." As a result of his careful writing, even though he based his figures upon types rather than upon individuals, readers often wrote to him to confirm that particular characters were based upon their neighbors.

Even Cape Cod however, could not avoid the effects of the Great War. With the entrance of the United States into the First World War, the federal government applied Progressive political ideals to national policy. The War Industries Board managed the national economy, income tax went from being a relatively minor part of the national budget to the most important source of revenue, and the Committee on Public Information shaped public opinion through government propaganda. These national efforts also forced many Americans to view ethnicity differently; some immigrant populations began to be accepted as “Americans” as long as they served the national cause. The War enhanced national cohesion.

The reality of assimilation, however, went hand in hand with the ideal of patriotic service. During this time Americans could not eat sauerkraut; they were pressured to dine on victory cabbage. Schools dropped classes in foreign languages. Ethnic genetic identity, during this period, was separated from ethnic cultural identity. It was acceptable to have an ethnic name and foreign blood, as long as one acted “one hundred percent American.”

Joe Lincoln made his contribution to this discourse through his novel *The Portygee*, which was first published serially in *The Delineator* and then as a book in 1920. Catching the tenor of the era, this book outsold all Lincoln’s books published previously. The novel addresses the tribulations of Cap’n Zelotes Snow whose orphaned grandson, Alberto Miguel Carlos Speranza, comes to live with him. Speranza is the son of Snow's daughter who married a Spanish opera singer against her parents' wishes while she was away at school, and thus symbolizes social transformations taking place off of the Cape. The proud Cap’n Snow initially has trouble accepting his grandson, calling him

a half-breed, and describing him as descended from a “Portygee,” and, in terms reminiscent of Samuel Adams Drake, a “macaroni eater.” In the volume’s twenty chapters, however, Alberto Speranza proves himself worthy of his grandfather’s love by volunteering for the Army and demonstrating a strong work ethic. Through his grandson’s meritorious behavior, Zelotes Snow even acknowledges gratitude to the other soldiers who fought in the war including men with immigrant names such as Kelly or “Whiskervitch,” or “land knows what more.”

The Yankee captain accepts foreign names, but not foreign cultures. Snow continues, “There’s only one thing I ask of ‘em, and that is that when they come here to live - to stay - under our laws and taking advantage of the privileges we offer ‘em - they’ll stop bein’ Portygees or Russians or Polacks or whatever they used to be or their folks were, and just be Americans - like you, Al.” In the same, heart-warming culminating scene in which it is revealed that Alberto Speranza will represent Harniss in the U.S. Congress, Cap’n Snow continues, “It’s a pretty fine country . . . And no howlin’, wild eyed bunch from somewhere else . . . are goin’ to come here and run it their way if we can help it.”

With this last text, Lincoln moves from the patriotism and service of the war to the paranoia and Nativism of the first Red Scare. Although Lincoln meant *The Portygee* to be a warm-hearted tale about a crotchety old Cape Codder who learns tolerance and rethinks prejudice, the novel reflects the spirit of the times which resulted in the civil liberties abuses of J. Edgar Hoover’s Palmer Raids, the suppression of the Industrial Workers of the World as a labor union for miners and loggers in the Northwest, and in

the ethnically-charged questionable execution in Massachusetts of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti , two “macaroni eaters” from the city of Brockton.

The Portygee is probably the most politically charged of Lincoln's novels. Published at the end of the First World War, it coincides with an important turning point in how antimodernist rhetoric functioned in the United States. With the end of the inflation and labor unrest associated with the termination of international hostilities and the subsiding of the Red Scare, the United States entered a period of prosperity. New businesses based upon modern technologies flourished, including automobile manufacturing, radio broadcasting, commercial aviation, and moving pictures. All of these industries threatened old ways of life. Clara Bow, Hollywood's "It Girl," was said to represent a "New Morality."

Many Americans feared that the nation was undergoing a process of homogenization. Individuals envisioned modern, commercial culture threatening traditional regional identity. A New Yorker cartoon by John Held, Jr. from the 1920s shows an American landscape composed of hot dog stands, restrooms, gas stations, billboards, and bootleggers. In this map, the Brown Derby Deli symbolizes Los Angeles.

Ethnicity sometimes continued to be used to decry the changes in society in the 1920s. Henry Ford, for example, who contributed as much as anyone to the breakdown of the old order with the production of his inexpensive automobiles, blamed degradations upon Jewish bankers and African American jazz singers. The Klu Klux Klan demonized everyone who was not white and Protestant. Overall however, Americans tended to fault new technologies, new ideologies, and new ways of doing business. This was the decade of the Scopes Monkey Trial and controversy surrounding the theory of evolution.

"An Honest Man's Business," a short story Lincoln originally published in the *Saturday Evening Post* in July of 1927 and later anthologized in *All Alongshore*, epitomizes the author's anti-modernist tendencies. This yarn contrasts Dan Young, a carpenter in the town of Wellmouth, with Horatio "Raish" Pulcifer, of the same town, a real estate and insurance agent, seller of suits made by the Rising Sun Ready-Tailored Outfitting Company, and local representative of the Diamond City Watch and Jewelry Distributors. Predictably with Lincoln, the carpenter is portrayed as the hero and the man of business is the villain. Young works with his hands creating value for local residents and Pulcifer, rhyming with Lucifer, makes a living by convincing individuals to sign contracts.

In this piece of magazine fiction, Pulcifer, who believes in corporations and modern entrepreneurial practices, sees individuals only as sources of business. Young, in contrast, still holds to village-based local interpersonal economics in which profit is subordinated to chivalry. He cannot stand to realize exorbitant gain at the expense of a helpless unprotected young woman. In the end, as in all Lincoln stories, virtue prevails and the hero wins the hand of the fair maiden. Yankee regional character proves stronger and more praiseworthy than the enticements of modern business. Everyone lives happily ever after in the Edenic realm of Cape Cod.

Lincoln in the Context of his Contemporaries

In writing this parable of virtue rewarded, Lincoln once again marched in step with other individuals who were promoting a particular vision of New England. Robb Sagendorph, the founder of *Yankee Magazine*, is one of his notable contemporaries. Like

Lincoln who lived most of his adult life in Hackensack, New Jersey, Sagendorph assumed the identity of the wise, rural, New Englander, although he grew up in Newton, Massachusetts, went to Harvard, and wrote for the *Harvard Lampoon*. Not an unsophisticated hick from the boondocks, upon graduation he went to business school and worked as a salesman for his family's manufacturing company. In 1930, however, during the depression Sagendorph moved from Greenwich, Connecticut, to the rural hamlet of Dublin, New Hampshire. There, beginning in 1935, he published *Yankee* as a way to fight against what he identified as the degradation of American culture. His magazine was to be "for Yankee readers, by Yankee writers, about Yankeedom." The magazine from southwestern New Hampshire was against "WPA leaf raking and crop destruction, salacious literature and salacious movies, inane radio programs and aimless automobile races" which Sagendorph suggested worked against "the real foundations of American living - ingenuity, inventiveness, private enterprise, reward for an honest day's labor, penalty for sloth." Sagendorph perceived that the commendable aspects of a New England culture based in Calvinism were being "swallowed inter a sea of chain stores, national releases, and nation wide hookups."

In fighting against these things, Sagendorph, like Lincoln, used an image of a self-sufficient man of Anglo background who lived in a region arguably unpolluted by economic and demographic transformations. Jud Hale, the longtime editor of *Yankee* and the founder's nephew, quipped that Sagendorph's image of the real Yankee was a male who was "never young and lived in either Maine or Vermont." The magazine's construction of the true Yankee was influenced by the poetic images of Robert Frost, New England's poet laureate, who like Sagendorph had reinvented himself. Born in San

Francisco and raised in urban Lawrence Massachusetts, Frost claimed in 1913 that his goal was to move to a farm "in New England where I could live cheap and get Yankier and Yankier." In his poems published in *North of Boston* and *New Hampshire*, Frost had located Yankeedom in New England's economically depressed mountains and foothills just as Lincoln had placed it on the Cape.

A number of members of the artistic *avant garde* of the first half of the twentieth century also viewed rural New England as America's ancestral homeland. The influential modernist photographer Paul Strand, for example, turned his attention to the subject in the 1940s. During the 1910s and 1920s Strand had created influential black and white photographs of machines and urban scenes that emphasized geometric forms and surface textures. Although figurative, these images leaned towards abstraction. In the 1940s while Americans fought for democracy overseas, Strand used these same artistic techniques to create a visual vocabulary in his photographs that celebrated the unchanging qualities of rural New England. Nancy Newhall, the curator of photography at the Museum of Modern Art, compiled a book of his images entitled *Time in New England*. She chose and edited classic New England writings, ranging from Puritan sermons and writings by Thoreau to abolitionist tracts, to accompany Strand's images and to emphasize continuities in the culture of the region. Strand's composition's and Newhall's text once again clung to rural New England's virtuous past, while rejecting the vulgarity of the increasingly urban, incorporated present.

Samuel Chamberlain, a photographer approximately a generation younger than Lincoln, executed images of New England that embody themes similar to the author's subjects. Chamberlain's images were beautifully published in inexpensive editions easily

sold to tourists who sought souvenirs of their sojourn in “Yankeeland.” These volumes, which portrayed a landscape untarnished by rapacious twentieth century capitalism, recognized the strength of that institution by their very existence. While trumpeting the quiet dignity of old New England architecture, Chamberlain’s souvenirs drew crowds of tourists to jam the roads with cars and to demand the comforts and conveniences of urban areas. Similarly, Robb Sagendorph's iconoclastic, contrarian *Yankee Magazine* has become essentially a guide to experiences where tourists and locals can find a middle ground to agree upon what qualifies as authentic regional consumables.

Conclusion

Joe Lincoln's portrayal of Cape Cod celebrated the virtues inherent in isolated, homogenous, Yankee villages; ironically his work also altered these rural communities. From his home just outside New York City and his summer retreat in Chatham, he presented New England's and Cape Cod's regional values as antidotes to modern society, but he did so through modern mechanisms. His tales of local, old-fashioned virtue were nationally distributed in the innovative, advertising-driven, *Saturday Evening Post*.

Joe Lincoln created a representation that was partially true, but his readers accepted it as completely accurate. Tourists arrived on the Cape, books in hand, from around the country looking for the characters, landscapes, and quaint individuals they had encountered in Lincoln’s tales. Many readers, in the past and the present, sought to escape into the Cape Cod of Joe Lincoln's novels and stories. In a world fraught with turmoil, change, and uncertainty, the villages of Denboro, Bayport, Trumet, and Wellmouth are safe, predictable, virtuous, and unchanging.

Joe Lincoln's dozens of novels and numerous short stories and poems worked to commodify Cape Cod. They helped to transform a quiet, economically marginal, strip of land into a salable entity. In 1925, a businessman recognized this in *The Cape Cod Magazine*. "No little credit," he wrote, "is due to Joseph C. Lincoln for popularizing Cape Cod and creating desire on the part of strangers to come here during the summer months." Consumers found the mythical cape very attractive and locals specialized in selling them what they sought.

By 1972, the advertised image of Cape Cod with lobsters, lighthouses, and nautical gear had become so standardized, so predictable, that the artist Roy Lichtenstein felt a need to comment upon it. In his painting *Cape Cod Still Life*, Lichtenstein, a pop artist who created images interrogating comic books and commercial culture, indicated that Americans had created an abstract iconography of Cape Cod. (Fig. 4) The genius of this work is that you cannot tell if it is based upon reality or upon a glossy, disposable postcard. In this painting, as in America's consciousness, Joe Lincoln's Cape Cod is a symbol as much as it is a place.

One wonders whether this is what Joe Lincoln intended.

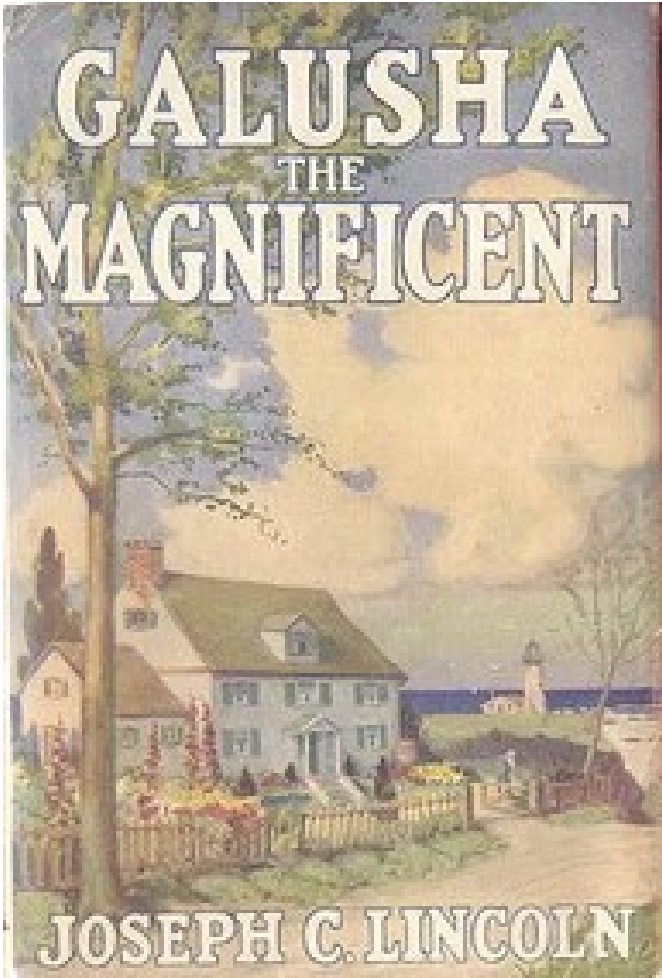


Fig. 1: Dust Jacket for *Galusha the Magnificent*

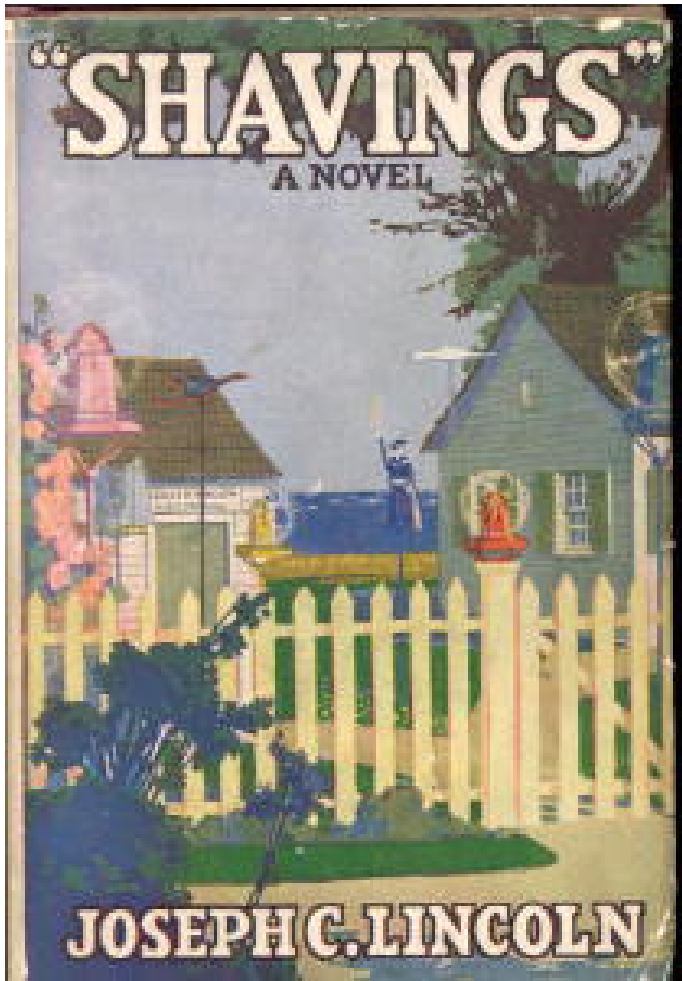


Fig. 2: Dust Jacket for *Shavings*



Fig. 3: Joseph C. Lincoln, ca. 1925

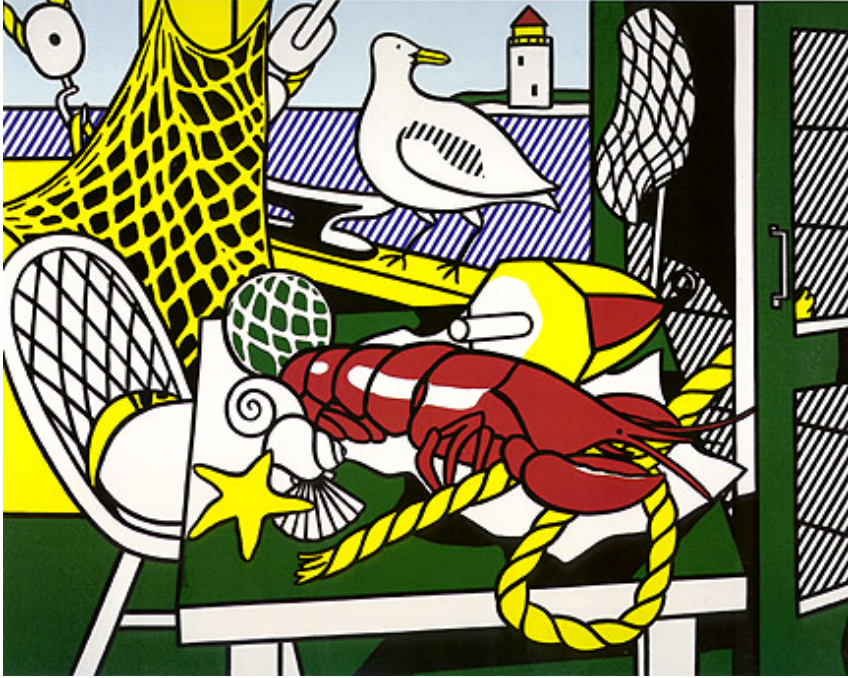


Fig. 4: Roy Lichtenstein, *Cape Cod Still Life*, 1972