

A Deformed Conscience: How American Realism Became a Vehicle for Critique

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that American literary realism functions not as a neutral reflection of reality, but as a vehicle for critique. Emerging from the epistemological rupture of the Civil War, where unprecedented mass death rendered the world unknowable, realist writers developed techniques that exposed the fault lines of American society. Through close readings of Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*, I demonstrate how colloquial dialect, concrete detail and domestic architecture become vessels for social indictment. Twain's "deformed conscience" dramatizes the relationship between individual moral instinct and the norms of a slaveholding society, while Wharton's descriptions of architecture reveal the gendered constraints of Gilded Age high society. Extending the mukraking movement, I explore the paradoxical vulnerability of realism: its capacity to expose systemic injustice while remaining susceptible to co-optation. I contend that realism's enduring significance relies on the paradoxical recognition that faithful representation must acknowledge its own incompleteness, a legacy that persists in contemporary literature.

INTRODUCTION

"Let]et us always have men ready to give the loving pains of a life to the faithful representing of commonplace things' Eliot's call for writing to represent a "sigh of the oppressed" foregrounds a central tension within literary realism: the grey area in defining what "faithful" entails. While realism can be understood as a subset of literary technique, it is perhaps more usefully conceived as a mode of characterization, aimed at depicting middle class life within a particular historical context (Campbell). Still, this definition is complicated by the inherently subjective nature of perception and the influence of historical, political and ideological context.

In reaction to scientific positivism, realism rejected the existence of a transcendent reality, instead embracing an empiricist view on life in its entirety (Werner). Reality was seen as the release of all things supernatural. In accordance with scientism, the emergence of realism similarly represented a detachment from religion. The realist movement itself was "in response to a crisis", most directly the Civil War. American culture itself "was in the "transition between the fading authority of supernaturalism and the

new dominance of scientific positivism” (Cummings 2). Prior to the formal introduction of realism into the American psyche, art was freed of its ties to religion in central Europe via the Reformation. “To Protestantism alone,” Hegel states, “the important thing is to get a sure footing in the prose of life, to make it absolutely valid in itself independently of religious associations, and to let it develop in unrestricted freedom” (Houlgate).

To define realism, then, is to view it as a commitment to versimilitude—the effect of truth. Although the term invites a wide range of interpretation, scholars generally agree that the exhibition of “Versimilitude” may constitute a unifying thread. Versimilitude can be achieved through concrete detail, the use of colloquial or vernacular language, or the prioritization of an ordinary subject matter rather than the mythic or sensational (Stoehr). As expressed by David Shumway, a novel can be identified as realistic when it conforms to a set criteria . (1) it depicts contemporary social life in the exigence of the text it is conceived in; (2) it includes detailed description, including visual and other sensory details; (3) the text exhibits psychologically and socially plausible characters for its time period; (4) it seeks to depict quotidian events or “ordinary life,” including the representation of ordinary people; (5) the events are plausible within the assumptions of the audience; and (6) the narrative reveals aspects of social life that are commonly represented in artistic works (Shumway 2).

It is a literature that dissolves its own artificiality, constructing a world that is both framed by the author’s own implicit judgements on what constitutes a ‘typical’ experience and aspires to objectivity. In contrast to the modernist novels of the 20th century, Terry Eagleton states that realist novels are novels that “are still able to relate fact and value, objective and subjective, inner and outer, individual and society.” However, by virtue of their large scope, novels may provide readers with the assumption that they are indicative of the majority population despite the fact that they do not do so.

This essay thus attempts to situate literature within a wider political strata, exploring the dynamism between realism’s aspirational objectivity and its inevitable entanglement with ideological forces, specifically how realist techniques such as colloquial dialect, concrete detail, and descriptions of domestic architecture are used by authors like Edith Wharton and Mark Twain to indict and outline systemic injustice in post-Civil War America. Both authors map the critical range of American realism, yet they deploy these techniques in different registers—illustrating the versatility of Realism. Twain’s use of colloquial dialect and moral psychology makes race and moral authority inalienable from his critique, where Wharton, writing in the Gilded Age, utilises material detail to reveal gendered and class-based distinctions in Old New York. These texts exhibit realism’s capacity to operate through different vessels, but still continue to reveal oppression. Above all, the realist depictions in Edith Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence* and Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* underscores the modus operandi of literature as an art that acts not as a neutral mirror, but as a vehicle for critique.

ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF REALISM IN AMERICA

The U.S. Civil War, waged between the diametrically opposed Slave-owning South and Industrial North represented more than a geographical shift: it provided a background to which a young innocent nation was beguiled into disillusionment. Following the industrial boom of the North began a mass exodus of immigrants into the U.S. While most Americans continued to reside in farms or rural areas in the latter half of the 19th century, this pattern dramatically shifted within a few decades: more than half of all Americans became concentrated in 12 cities. The grim reality of industry began to penetrate American society with unprecedented force: overcrowding, unsanitary conditions, wage slavery, and the plight of the lower class began to take root in America. Yet, as the continent continuously began to cement itself as a world power, profound alienation rose in response to its ascendancy. (Kumar 3). This tension between nationalist ambition and social instability would become fertile ground for the emergence of a new literary culture as writers turned away from the romanticized vision of American life to confront harsh truths of urbanization. Optimistic claims of progress and manifest destiny” that once defined American literature were “tempered for many Americans by a need to rebuild and simply endure”.

REALISM AND ITS PRACTITIONERS

Realism’s critical function of representing struggle through literature is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the muckraking movement of the early twentieth century. The literary landscape during this time was replete with nationalist sentiment and competitive spirit unseen before this time. These stories came to fruition in two ways: the dime novel, a fast paced paperbound booklet of shallow plot, and newly revised historical romances. Muckrakers, investigative journalists and social critics who sought to expose corruption and social injustice, turned to such consumable forms of literature and adjusted them to display political issues. This transition from popular romance to political realism embodied a significant shift in American literary history—as political failure began to plague daily life, the boundary between literary convention and lived reality became increasingly impossible to maintain.

A monumental case for realism is found in Samuel Clemens’ *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), written under the pseudonym Mark Twain. For much of his career, Mark Twain wrote under the tutelage of William Dean Howells, the “Father of American Realism”. Twain’s writing, lush in its description and detailed in its prose, is evocative of realism’s distinctive style (Cummings 4). Prior to the Civil War, Twain cemented his identity as a self-made man who followed the principles of a protestant work ethic, providing philosophical stability through its monochromatic morality. However, the Civil War plucked Twain from the comfortable grasps of a stable life. This uprooting had an undeniable impact on Twain’s later career, as the moral ambiguity of war shaped the realist style that would come to define his writing.

“Jim said it made him all over trembly and feverish to be so close to freedom. Well, I can tell you it made me all over trembly and feverish, too, to hear him, because I begun to get it through my head that he was

most free—and who was to blame for it? Why, me. I couldn't get that out of my conscience, no how nor no way.” (Twain)

Huckleberry Finn's voice, colloquial and informal, align with Shumway's hallmarks of realism, its expressive depth is often cited as a groundbreaking shift in American literature, one that contested prevailing linguistic standards of the era. Twain's humor deliberately undermines narrative authority in order to introduce a multiplicity of voices. Throughout the novel, Finn's voice is used as a vessel to provide distinction between “institutional norm”, in this case the moral code of a slaveholding society, and “individual conscience”, his innate moral rule. This distinction marks the novel as one where dialect “is never ornamental; it is always ideological” (Smith). Provocative is the tension that Finn's inner monologue illustrates, not only of the chasm between Finn's morality and the outer world, but of Twain's subjective experience and the influence on his mind. Twain, an avid reader of Charles Darwin's *The Descent of Man* (1871), believed that humans evolved from the instincts of animals, and hence would adopt habits that would be favoured by natural selection. Morality, in Darwin's view, was rooted in the innate desire for social validation (Cummings 4). As Twain increasingly adopted a Darwinist view on human nature, his evolving beliefs found expression in his writing. Twain himself described *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as a book where “a sound heart and a deformed conscience come into collision and conscience suffers defeat”. Twain's “sound heart”, embodied in Finn's sympathy for Jim, was a literary representation of the Darwinian social instincts that Twain deemed as necessary for survival (Cummings 4). Crucially, Twain's moral views are reflected in Finn's elaborate reasoning. Twain himself admitted to experience an epiphany regarding racism, framing his writing as a cautionary tale to fight back against the receding notions of race to pre-Civil War. His decision to help Jim is condemned by society, and he receives no validation or affirmation for his choice. Thus, he must embark on a voyage against his outer world, where “right” cannot be differentiated from “wrong”, unable to control the hands that shape his conscience. Realism in this era is centrally concerned with discerning individual morality with institutionalized social structures. By exposing Finn's “deformed conscience,” the representative of the social code of a slaveholding society, Twain utilises realism as a vehicle for social critique, where his “sound heart” represents a psyche that Twain himself saw a mirror in (Hotchkiss).

A later but no less significant example of realism's ideological entanglement appears in Edith Wharton's use of domestic space to expose class and gender codes in *The Age of Innocence* (1920). Wharton, among other American authors, utilised architectural space not as a vessel for plot but a living, breathing character itself. “house-building, and for women, house-keeping, have been recognized as a kind of autobiographical enterprise—a visible and concrete means of defining and articulating the self”. Preceding the war, American literature treated the house as a symbolic, mystical space. In the post-war era, however, the house became a primary site for exposing social and moral conditions.

“...long since made it impossible for her to go up and down stairs, [...] she had made her reception rooms upstairs and established herself (in flagrant violation of all the New York proprieties) on the ground floor of her house; so that, as you sat in her sitting-room window with her, you caught [...] the unexpected vista

of a bedroom with a huge low bed upholstered like a sofa, and a toilet-table with frivolous lace flounces and a gilt-framed mirror. ” (Wharton 36)

What emerges first is Mrs. Mingott’s repudiation of cultural orthodoxy, as her house is described first “in terms of its idiosyncratic departures from architectural and social properties” (Chandler). This rebellion exposes a link between morality and material form, as Mrs. Mingott corporeal identity is distinguished by the architectural manifestation of her home. As Mrs. Mingott, physically confined to the ground floor, inverts the conventional arrangement of her house, her “characteristic independence” (Wharton 36) finds expression in architectural transgression. Through the dislocation, she frees herself from the oppressive protocol of high society and morphs into the tangible geography of her own home through an unconventional architectural space (Chandler). The hallmarks of realism, observable detail, is clearly exhibited in the excerpt. However, such detail is not neutral. Wharton’s choice of adjectives, “frivolous,” and “Gilt-Framed,” convey implicit judgement for the rules that govern high-society. “Gilt-framed” in particular, represents the superficial luxury that rules architecture, specifically through Wharton’s ironic tone that exposes this triviality through judgement. The inverse arrangement of Mingott’s house shocked New York visitors, who associated her unusual setup with adulterous women and “architectural incentives to immortality” (Wharton 37). However, Wharton’s tone suggests that the protagonist, rather than agree with the invisible social ordinance, finds power in defiance. This is strengthened by Wharton’s earlier commentary, which depicts Mingott as a monarch who “throned in” her house, one that sits as “visible proof of her moral courage” (Wharton 28). Wharton’s description, a material record of her own life, renders her not only a writer but also an anthropologist who has the power to utilise her realist description not only for purely decorative purposes, but also in the “service of satire and social criticism” (Saunders).

Wharton’s social criticism serves to heavily criticize the preservation of society at the expense of womanhood and ingenuity not only through its characterization but its surroundings, including architecture. “The Old World of New York society where Wharton was raised had strict cultural codes that demanded a very specific type of conduct and etiquette”, (Taylor) allowing her to act not only as a writer but as an anthropologist who acted upon the material record of her own life. Wharton’s social criticism hence exposes the preservation of Old New York society at the expense of individuality and femininity: through Wharton’s description of architectural transgression, Wharton exposes how etiquette and convention function as instruments of control for both class and gender, where deviation from the norm is equated with danger. The difference between Wharton’s description, depicting Mingott as a monarch who was ‘throned in’ her house contrasted with the visitor’s interpretation of her home, exposes a social order that demands women suppress ingenuity in order to maintain decorum and acceptance. Wharton’s critique parallels Twain’s in its central conflict of individuality against institutional norm, yet it manifests in a different register. Twain locates critique in the moral psychology of the central character against the backdrop of a slaveholding society, where Wharton, by contrast externalizes critique in the material world. Both authors utilise realism to indict systemic injustice, but their mode of execution is stylistically

REALISM AS PROGRESSIVE CRITIQUE

While Twain and Wharton often filtered their critique through nuanced interiorities of their characters or in the symbolic weight of architecture, some authors adopted a comparatively more visceral mode of communication. Upton Sinclair, for example, abandoned the escapist convention of romance in favour of a gritty, realist plot that sought to expose the brutal conditions of Industrial America. The love between Jurgis and Ona "cannot lead to happiness because of the bad economic situation and brutal supervisors who exploit their workers," and the marriage ends with no consolation of a romantic resolution. Through the "exact and unrelenting description of the disgusting and miserable conditions" that plague the Chicago stockyards, Sinclair renders visible the exploitative nature of industrial capitalism. Yet, Hornung astutely notes the limitations of Sinclair's critique. Sinclair's message was disregarded as a substantial mark for change due to readers focusing on the graphic detail of food adulteration rather than the systemic exploitation of the workers itself. The passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act in 1906, while reform "deflected the criticism of the political system to the issue of pure food," demonstrating the dual nature of realism in its ability to expose injustice while it has the potential to be domesticated and neutralised by the very system it condemns (Hornung 7). Unlike Twain and Wharton, who embed critique through character and domestic space, Sinclair utilises the novel as journalistic evidence, utilising documentary detail to indict the brutality of capitalism. 'The jungle' hence outlines another facet of realism as a critique, where the novel acts as an instrument of political exposure.

CONCLUSION

This essay has explored how literature employs realism as a vehicle for social critique and the mechanisms to which it operates within the framework of faithful representation in order to document experiences that often resist representation. What flourishes in realist literature is a plurality of perspectives, rather than a single authoritative vision of social reality that of which preceded the era. Through the vessel of realism, critique extends beyond exposing individual injustice to indicting the structures that governed the roots of American life, leading to a literary style that was entrenched into an ideological framework. Literature in this case forms a liminal space that highlights how "we know little of the actual relation between what we see of the world itself", and the myriad of ways that reality could take form. This ideological challenge is perhaps most profoundly illustrated in the response to the Civil War, where its "routine namelessness" forced the realist movement to confront a challenge that was central to its core. The unprecedented scale of death had crafted an epistemological crisis: how could one render the world knowable if there is an ethical recognition that the representation is wrong. Realist writers responded by developing a "paradoxical form of realism which recognised that what was most real about the dead, in the sense of their real function in a real world, was their unreality" (Finseth)

It is the realist acknowledgement of a conscious, paradoxical reality that characterizes literature as an entanglement to which the institutional norm and the individual conscience had the ability to coexist in

tension, amalgamating into a social critique with the power of change. Realism will undoubtedly continue to persist in contemporary literature, shifting itself to the ongoing epistemological claim that reality can be represented, however imperfectly.

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