

Treatment of Social Realism in Short Stories of O'Henry and Twain's Huckelberry Finn

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American Realism was a late nineteenth-century literary movement that began as a reaction against romanticism and the sentimental tradition associated primarily with women writers. Chief among the authors writing in this genre were William Dean Howells, Henry James, Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, Kate Chopin, and Stephen Crane. Although the realist aesthetic influenced European as well American literature, the American tradition emerged somewhat later in the century and employed slightly different conventions than its continental counterpart. American Realism was most commonly a feature of narrative fiction, although authors occasionally applied its themes and literary techniques to poetry and drama as well.

Twain had been widely regarded as the most celebrated late nineteenth-century American author to contribute to the realist movement. For Twain and other American writers of the late 19th century, realism was not merely a literary technique: It was a way of speaking truth and exploding worn-out conventions. Thus it was profoundly liberating and potentially at odds with society. The story of Huck Finn, a poor boy who decides to follow the voice of his conscience and help a Negro slave escape to freedom, even though Huck thinks this means that he will be damned to hell for breaking the law.

Twain's masterpiece, which appeared in 1884, is set in the Mississippi River village of St. Petersburg. The son of an alcoholic bum, Huck has just been adopted by a respectable family when his father, in a drunken stupor, threatens to kill him. Fearing for his life, Huck escapes, feigning his own death. He is joined in his escape by another outcast, the slave Jim, whose owner, Miss Watson, is thinking of selling him down the river to the harsher slavery of the deep South. Huck and Jim float on a raft down the majestic Mississippi, but are sunk by a steamboat, separated, and later reunited. They go through many comical and dangerous shore adventures that show the variety, generosity, and sometimes cruel irrationality of society. In the end, it is discovered that Miss Watson had already freed Jim, and a respectable family is taking care of the wild boy Huck. But Huck grows impatient with civilized society and plans to escape to "the territories"- Indian lands.

The ending gives the reader another version of the classic American “purity” myth: the open road leading to the pristine wilderness. Away from the morally corrupting influences of civilization.

All writers are true inheritors and by virtue of their creative power contribute in the very process of inheritance. They take whether consciously or not, what their predecessors pass on to them, through the great treasure house of thought and feeling registered in their works. Then from their space in time and place, the socio-political conditions of the immediate world influencing their creativity and their contribution in turn, impact the lives of people ; individual lives and also certain section or class of society.

O.Henry, remains one of the most widely read American short narrative writers... master alike of tragedy, romance extravaganza and tales of the mystery of common life with a special skill in stories of the supernatural. Starting with *Cabbages and Kings* in 1904, O.Henry established himself as a writer with his second book *The Four Million* (1906). The third volume *The Triumph Lamp* (1907), contained some of his experiences in Texas. Most of his stories depict the life he shared in a constantly shifting scenario of the city’s colorful, endlessly varied facets. The life he portrays is the real New York of his day with its endless allure, its thousands of beckoning contrarities and denials and true to life characters. The toiling masses, the new work culture, women-over the counter, the laughter shading off into signs of sadness and even despair. O.Henry pictures the given New York culture ... the police, the church, the welfare agencies and the labour unions tend rather to thrust the innocent (for whose love and protection society creates them), into the maw of predatory individuals (Elsie in New York). Thus poor Elsie, a little peacherino who might have had a number of safely respectable jobs, but for her protectors, winds up as a model whose fate (O.Henry assures us by quoting Dickens) is to be numbered among the “lost your Excellency”. While Elsie admires herself in Russian sables in the mirror, her employer, Other is gleefully reserving a private dining room for two, with “the usual band and the 85 Johannisburger with roast.”..... and O.Henry concludes painfully with a dig at the individuals and the society:

Lost, Associations, and Societies,
 Lost, Right Reverends and wrong
 Reverends’ of every order, lost
 Reforms and law makers, born
 With heavenly compassion in your
 Hearts, but with a reverence of
 Money in your souls. And lost thus
 Around us every day. (Collected stories of O.Henry. P.726)

In his stories we find suffering damsels, joyless existence of the shop girls a picture of the new life culture – representative of the changes that gave a new look to and affected every walk of life in turn resulting in the changed attitudes and thinking of members of this new emerging society and their values. His short stories reflect a period just becoming fully aware of the hardening class structure which a burgeoning industrial era had imposed on America’s democratic society and which the writer

details so minutely and accurately. Hotels. Café bars cheap restaurants, theatres and roof-gardens were an important fact of the 19th, 20th century New York culture and many of O.Henry characters seek refuge from the darkness of their existence to these “places-of quick-flight”. O.Henry himself was a frequent visitor and preserved their atmosphere in his stories. The sociological import in his stories is too visible. In *Brick Dust Row* and *An Unfinished Story* his deep concern for the unfortunates especially the victims of environment is highlighted. Where the former depicts the damaging effects on the lives of the inhabitants in inadequate and squalid surroundings the *Guilty Party* attempts to show that slum children, forced to play in the streets, are defeated in life even before they start. He paints it with exactness: “Outside was one of those crowded streets of the east side, in which, as twilight falls Satan sets up his recruiting office. A mighty host of children danced, ran and played in the streets. Some in rags, some in clean white and beribboned, some wild and restless as young hawks, some gentle-faced and shrinking some shrieking rude and sinful words, some listening awed, but soon grown familiar to embrace-here were the children playing in the corridors of the house of sing. Above the play ground forever hovered a great bird... the bird was known to humorists as the stork. But people of Chrystie street were better ornithologists. They called it a Vulture”. (Collected stories of O.Henry.p 712.) Elsewhere he makes this realistic depiction of situation with such ease: And then followed the big city’s biggest shame, its most ancient and rotten surviving canker, its pollution and disgrace, its blight and perversion, its forever infamy and guilt, forstered, unproved and cherished, handed down from a long ago century of the basest barbarity-the Hue and Cry. Nowhere but in the big cities does it survive and here most of all, where the ultimate perfection of culture, citizenship and alleged superiority joins, bawling, in the chase.” (Collected stories of O.Henry, p.714) The *Guilty Party* is a grim tale of parental neglect-a serious issue and relevant even today. O.Henry did not ignore even shop girls. And so in *An Unfinished Story*-that ends with the author at the bar of judgment being asked if he belongs to a certain group: “Not on your Immortality “, said I.”I’m only the fellow that set fire to an orphan asylum, and murdered a blind man for his pennies.” (Collected stories of O.Henry .P. 692.) It is said that these stories caused Theodore Roosevelt to admit that it was O.Henry who started him on his campaign for office girls Often we find his characters are under a strain of some kind and under a delusion-these in fact were the toiling millions and his stories are a true seek refuge from the darkness of their existence to these “places-of quick-flight”. O.Henry himself was a frequent visitor and preserved their atmosphere in his stories. The sociological import in his stories is too visible .

Realism embraces all aspects of American life. Many of the old themes were the same but they were treated in a new light including that of love, and of the role of art and the artist in society. The romantic school had treated love as a refuge from the commonplace in practical life; the realists used the theme to show up the immorality of bourgeois society which made love and marriage a matter of business. The romanticists understood the rule of art and the artist merely as a great power which could conjure up visions and influence the outlook of men and women; without denying this. The realists saw man on the background of social conflicts of the day and analysed human nature and human emotions in relation to this background. The

reader could imagine the past and the future of each literary personage because the development of the image was closely linked with the historical development of the present. The American realists rejected sentimentality and the “genteel tradition” in the I style of writing. Their portrayal of life, as they found it, may sometimes have been rude and unpolished but it was always original and truthful.

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