



GNITED MINDS
Journals

*Journal of Advances and
Scholarly Researches in
Allied Education*

*Vol. X, Issue No. XX,
October-2015, ISSN 2230-
7540*

REALISM IN THE POST-WAR AMERICAN NOVEL

AN
INTERNATIONALLY
INDEXED PEER
REVIEWED &
REFEREED JOURNAL

Realism in the Post-War American Novel

Tajinder Singh*

Assistant Professor of English, SD College, Ambala Cantt

Abstract – *The progressive drain of the country's spiritual potential; the conflict between viewpoints of different generations, the intensification of interracial and social conflicts whose bitterness could not be concealed by the deceptive rogues of this affluent society- these were the problems that the literature of critical realism dealt with in those years when American intervention in Vietnam served as a catalyst, speeding up and dramatizing many processes in the country's internal life.*

Key Words – Generations, Society, Literature, Intensification

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INTRODUCTION

After the Second World War, the three decades, mark a blistering section of America's literary history. One may judge it first by the state of the novel which together with the short story, became firmly entrenched as the leading literary genre of the century. Both renowned prosaists and newcomers continued to succumb to the dream of writing the great American novel and hoped to repeat the success of *An American Tragedy*, *A Farewell to Arms*, *The Great Gatsby* and *The Grapes of Wrath*. But the American literature reflects the intensifying crisis in bourgeois consciousness, a noticeable loss of integrity and vividness in the artistic experience, the growing doubt in the adequacy and effectiveness of arts- these and many other socio-political factors characterize the epoch and at the same time express the immanent logic of human logical development. The absolute identification of literature and life professed by most American writers in the early twentieth century was followed by a more modest assessment of the expressive possibilities of art, a tendency to alienate the object depicted and to employ conventional subtle devices. The kaleidoscopic post-war literary climate, with an almost total absence of truly outstanding works of genius and the eroded boundaries of aesthetic movements, gives the impression that the American novel is short of breath. Still it would be unfair to say that the novel as a genre capable of expressing social changes and the national character of the American people:

"In the years since the end of world-war II, the novel in America has been nihilistic, existential, apocalyptic, and psychological: it has asserted the romantic self: it has recorded the loss of the self: it has explored the possibilities of social accommodation: it has withdrawn from social considerations; it has been radical and conservative. In form it has been loosely picaresque; it has returned to its beginners in myth; it has been

*contrived with a cunningness of technique virtually decadent; it has been purely self-reflexive and respondent to its own development. And the novel has died."*¹

This snapshot of contradictory and at times paradoxical trends in post-war prose belongs to Marcus Klein, one of the most eminent scholars in the field. While one can agree with certain of the critic's observations, one must definitely reject the notion that the novel is a dead genre. For Klein the history of the contemporary American novel is first of all "a series of losses and creative defeats".² "Landscapes of nightmare" do to a great extent define the panorama of the post-war American novel which was significantly influenced first by existentialism and then gave prominence to works of black humour as a distinctive offshoot of the aesthetics of the absurd. Still critical realism remained the heart of American prose, as in the years of its second flowering in the era between the two world wars. For in all its wealth of form and the variety of individual talents the literature of critical realism refused to become reconciled to the social and moral evils of the times.

Struggling to reproduce reality not only by imitating life but by reflecting essential inner relationships, the realistic writer by the very nature of his chosen creative approach is consistently obliged to perform a twofold task; he must as F. Scott Fitzgerald put it, view the world with double vision. Apart from criticizing abnormal, senseless aspects of social structure and human psychology which continue to block the path of history, he is entitled to reflect upon an ideal that is feasible and accessible to his contemporaries, upon the harmonization and humanization of all forms life.

In the thirty years that follows the last war we witness the further development and struggle of two views of history and contemporary events, opposed in

principle, but based on a common aesthetic goal whose foundation had been laid in American literature by the early forties. We speak here of the social novel, the central genre of the twenties and thirties at which time it reached its highest artistic level. Based on pessimism and a lack of faith, these works that dealt with social protest were often steeped in sorrow and despair. Van Wyck Brooks, the elder of liberal-democratic criticism, noted in 1941 that:

*"...even where as in many cases, these writers are fighting for social; justice, they still picture life as hardly worth the trouble of fighting for it. Their tone is cynical, bleak, hard-boiled, hard-bitten and life for them is vain, dark and empty, the plaything in Theodore Dreiser's phrase of "idle rocking forces" or currents of material interest Today (they seem to delight in kicking their world to pieces, as if civilization were all a pretense and everything noble a humbug".*³

But after the war the social reality of the United States still based on the bitter antagonism and the opposition of class forces undergoes substantial changes; the facets of social and personal life from which literature draws its material become increasingly more complex and at times ambiguous. Many writers of the older generation were simply lost in the new environment and could never develop new systems of social and moral evaluations.

Any criticism of the bourgeois structure fraught with countless threats to the human personality must have a constructive basis lest the writer's work become permeated with despair and nihilism which in turn become apathy and spiritual bankruptcy. The literature of naturalism the novels depicting violence with their hoarse hysterical, sickly intonations are challenged by a more thoughtful balanced literary approach to the depiction of reality. Rejecting neither criticism nor the expression of heartfelt sympathy; saddened by the darker side of life. Overcoming the deeply rooted positivistic dogma of social and psychological predestination instinctively choosing the true course amid a chaos of viewpoints, the contemporary American literature of critical experience with the cumulative spiritual and moral wealth of humanity. Following in the footsteps of William Faulkner who in his Nobel Prize speech refused to acknowledge the imminent destruction of mankind these prose writers affirm the desirability and possibility of social progress where a simple American will be able to actively determine his own fate.

The war novel does not so much depict the war as the American army. But it would be a mistake to abide by the rigid classification made by Charles Eisinger in his monograph *The Fiction of the Forties*. Where this literary-historical phenomenon is reduced to two categories: novels which neglect the American war machine and novels which affirm it. The nihilistic protests against all violence and any army in Robert Lowery's *Casualty*.

A certain internal affinity between the works of war novelists developed not only in view of their common theme, but due to their common dependency on the best examples of the rebellious prose of the twenties and thirties. Hemingway, Dos Passos and Farrell taught Mailer, Jones and Lowry who in their, who in their novels resurrected the intonations of despair and grief. Young novelists just entering the literary arena came to the extraordinary painful conclusion that in the words of their analyst John Aldridge, a basic result of the recently ended war was *"... the disappearance of a stable society and a common set of values"*.⁴

Disillusionment in the power of social theories to analyze the cause and effects of historical development led to an increased interest in the concrete facts of daily life and brought many of the younger generation of novelists into camp of those who favoured the aesthetic views of naturalism. Whatever its subject- be it war, peace, former ghetto dwellers, or the middle class- the main theme of the twentieth century classic American novel is the problem of man and circumstances. The conceptions of social and biological determinism which from the kernel of the naturalistic view of life were to a great extent inherited by the war novelists. Naturalism has many faces; in post-war America it is manifested in the complex factual novels of many writers. The best of the war novels cannot be classified as unadulterated naturalism for apart from rigidschematism in the choice of various motivations, they also express acute distress at man's problems and a readiness to share in and alleviate his sufferings; this marks a break with naturalistic impassivity. The lives of Americans moved along a course marked by fatality and doom: *"He was feeling a deep and familiar bitterness; everything turned out lousy for him sooner or later. His mouth tightened. No matter what he tried, no matter how hard he worked, he seemed always to be caught. The bitterness became sharper, flooded him for a moment. There was nothing he wanted, something he could feel and it was always teasing him and disappearing"*.⁵

The impressive volume of war prose and the many talented war novelists seemed to indicate a promising start for young American litterateurs. But after a decade of prose only James Jones in his novella *The Pistol* and his novel *The Thin Red Line* proved faithful to previous themes and styles. With some justification John Aldridge attributes the disintegration of the group of war writers to the exhaustion of their storehouse of direct observations on the war as well as to change in the spiritual and political climate of the country: *"in place of a tangible and readily usable subject, the period has given us the indefinite suspension and equivocations of the cold war against an emotional background of alternating and even at moments coexisting anxiety and apathy... There can be no question of experiencing the Cold War in any of the old vigorous senses of the world. Only simply endures it , waits it out, and in the end gives it over the mind to the protective custody of its own resources, its own power to enforce sanity and order within the close precincts of the creative work of art."*⁶

The thoughtful approach to the growing number of contrasting phenomena in post-war America and the torrent of opposition that burst forth in the sixties assume various artistic forms, many if them, it goes without saying, will not lead to an aesthetic of realism. Theoreticians and artists for the avant-garde of this period rallied behind the literary banner of the absurd, new amorality, the novel of destruction and black humour.

In the complex epoch of sixties when traditions were broken and foundations were shaken, The American artist was faced with a dilemma. He could either show a world turned inside out, a world in a total opposition to all that exists, or he had to seek a complex synthesis of the actual problems of the day. After meeting the challenges of the black humourists, writers of critical realism were obliged to defend the integrity of their ideological and artistic position, first in an internal polemic with those who like Herbert Selby and John Rechy represent the new wave of naturalism and then against the so called popular literature that feeds like a parasite on the living tree of realism. The general crisis of the American mind has noticeably lowered the interest in the abstract, metaphysical-existential problems of black humour; once again literature connected with the traditions of angry thirties has come to the foreground. The entire group of young writers have experienced the beneficial influence of the realistic art developed in the periods between world wars. The novels of the time reminds us that poverty, misfortune and social conflicts are still alive and painful. In her novels Joyce Carol Oates has tried to show the true life situation of America's working people and to present a faithful picture of the indefinitely complex socio-psychological reality in which the present generation of Americans suddenly found itself and this discovery was almost too sudden.

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Corresponding Author

Tajinder Singh*

Assistant Professor of English, SD College, Ambala Cantt